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CENTS

Western, **DETECTIVE** & Adventure Stories

OCT.
1926

★ THE **BLACK MASK** ★

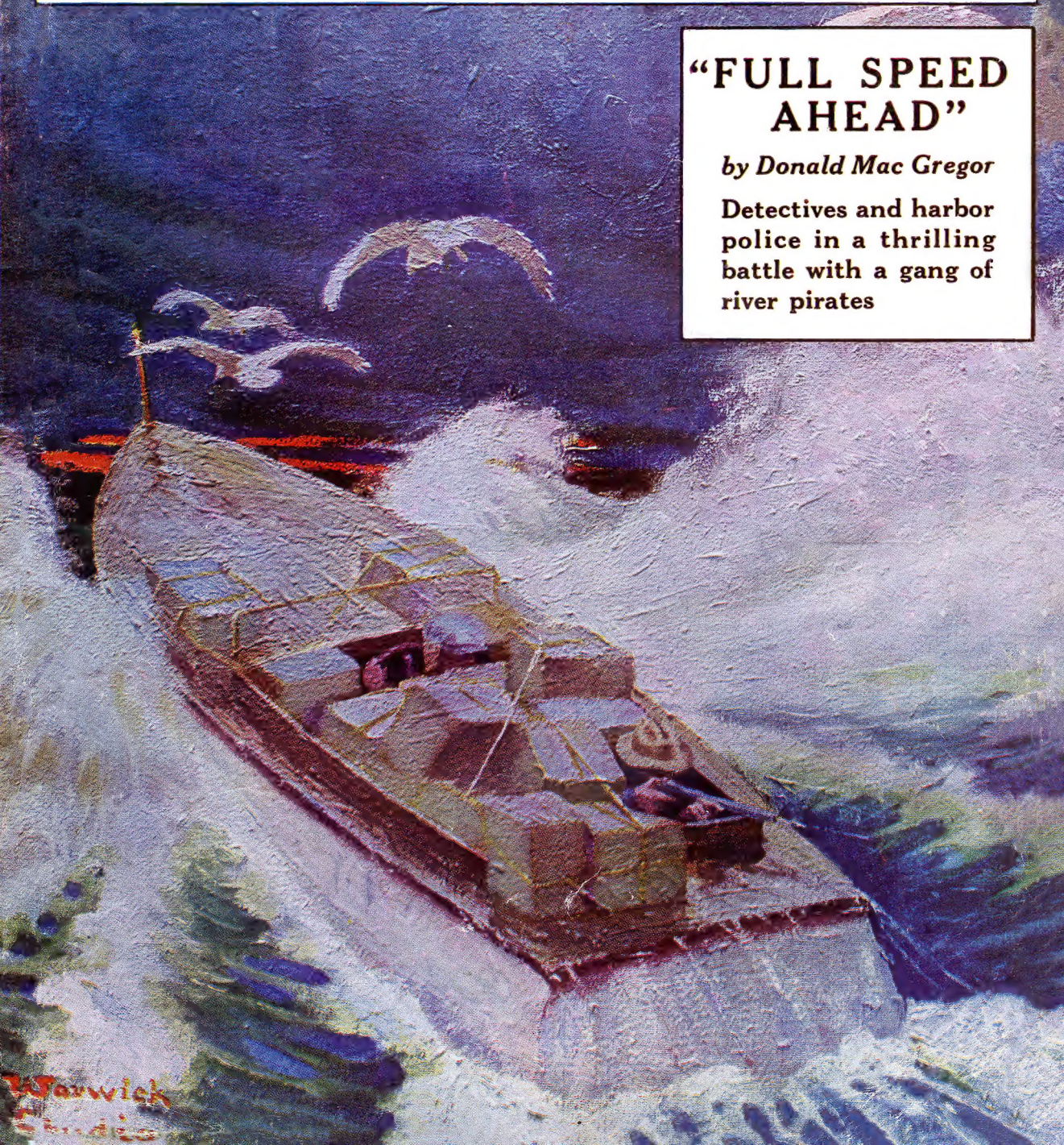
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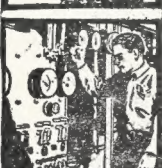
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VOL. IX.

OCTOBER, 1926

No. 8

THE BLACK MASK

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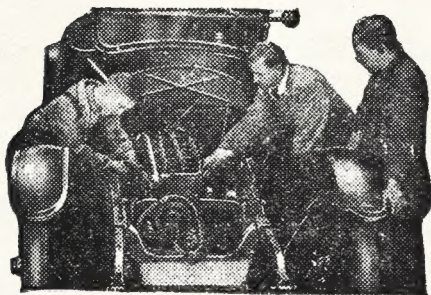
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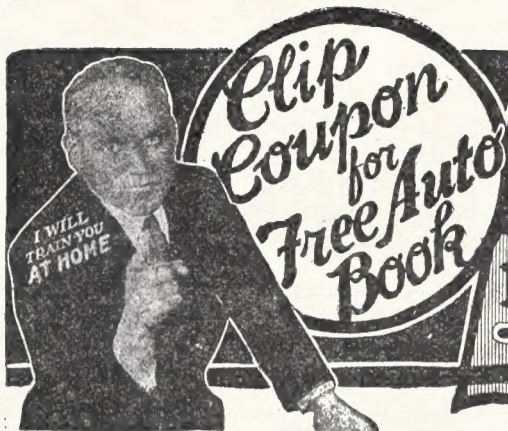
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OUT OF THE NIGHT

BY CARROLL
JOHN DALY



SLOWLY I plodded up the steep hill to the little town above. Once only I stopped to buy a pack of cigarettes. It was odd the feeling I had that the man behind the counter was watching me closely—furtively taking in my dark blue suit, black tie, and soft brown hat, as he fingered the crisp new bill. He hated to make change; but finally he did, shoving it reluctantly across the worn old counter—then raising his head, he spoke.

"It's an awful day to be let—" His eyes met mine and he paused, licked his lips a moment, lowered his head again and stammered, "a bad day to be out in—for anybody."

"Yes?"

I looked through the muggy window to the bleakness of the old cobbled street without. Rain, mist, hail, and a heavy fog; yet I had found it pleasant—wonderful and beautiful. Dark clouds and blurred sky certainly, but I could look at them as long as I wished—there was none to bid me stop. The sky, the air, and even the rain was free—and so was I.

Up the hill I continued. I wanted to breathe a bit before I turned and sought the train—I wanted to walk, too—perhaps out into the country and see the trees and the grass, and sit upon a bank and smoke. Not think—I'd done all that. What if the rain did come a bit harder as the door of the shop swung closed behind me? What if the water did flow in little rivulets from my hat and seep through the soles of my thin shoes? I didn't care—I turned up my collar and plodded on.

Not till I reached the top did I turn. Then I stood there and looked across at the mountainous stretches of the Palisades, the dark greenish blue of the tumbling Hudson River, and directly below me the thick walls, the towering stacks and an occasional tower of the great stone prison. I didn't stand there and shake my fist at the murky gray of the living hell I had just left. There was no feeling of bitterness against the warden or the guards or the district attorney who had sent me there. Each one of them had done his duty. It is not the supposed cruelty of the prison "screws"

that makes men bad and drives some mad. It is the dull monotony of the prison life. For three years the Big House had been my home.

I had been caught and convicted, and through the cleverness and perhaps standing of a good mouthpiece, mingled with the misdirected mercy of a judge whose heart got the better of his head, my jolt had been a short one. I had made no more than the usual plea to the parole board, had no money left to hire a lawyer—and yet I was free on parole; a parole which my head told me I would carefully respect, yet my subconscious mind told me I would break at the first opportunity. Like hundreds of others who came out of prison, I was bent on vengeance—but unlike those others who forgot so quickly, I would remember.

I had been sacrificed to save others. The promised alibi that Parsons was to furnish did not come through. The whispered word in the right direction was never spoken. The law needed a victim, and I had filled that bill. No proof that he had betrayed me! No proof that I had been trapped and delivered into the hands of the police! No proof that his witnesses didn't refuse to make good! No proof that the needed "police graft" could have been bought! I just knew—one always knows those things. Now—I'd have to settle with Parsons. That would be the only thing that would drag me back to the Big House. After that—I was going to run straight. But Parsons and I must square accounts. I clenched my hands tightly. This was something that couldn't wait. Those who wanted to square accounts with Parsons didn't live long.

So I turned onto a country road, leisurely walking beneath the dripping trees. Parsons didn't know how I felt—never could know until we met. He had written to me; prison mail is smuggled in in many ways. There was no way of telling that the letters came from him. His name wasn't signed to them, and it

wasn't his hand-writing. I didn't answer them—didn't threaten. I thought out my hatred, wrote it in my heart and let it burn deep there. For the three years I remained behind those gray walls, I had answered but one letter. That was from the girl who was to wait for me; the girl who was to live straight—and that one letter from her told me that she was running with the pack—Parsons' gang. It wasn't there in so many words—but I knew—and that ended that.

Now I shrugged my shoulders. I was a man with a purpose, and with a responsibility to no one but myself. A man too who was known to pay his debts. Parsons would know that and wait—and wonder how much of the truth I guessed. I always kept my own counsel. To obey the prison rules and live up to the letter of them is mighty convenient for a man who longs to own a bit of the sky again.

The rain stopped, the clouds broke—and with the suddenness of the prison gong the sun shone forth. What depression I had, slipped away with the muggy air. I shook that somber mood, which didn't fit me well, anyway. Just a simple gesture and I was my old self again, whistling, too, as I lighted a butt and wandered further into the country.

And I knew it! How? I don't know. Just the echoing voice of the past sweeping back over me. But instinct or something told me that I was followed—someone was getting my smoke. I didn't turn, didn't look back over my shoulder; just sauntered leisurely on. A bend in the road, and I swung sharply to the side—slipping back into the shadows of a clump of trees.

Silence for a time, then the beat of feet—scraping, hurrying feet. No gumshoeing detective this, but a man who half ran and half walked as his feet sounded their steady scraping along the paved state highway. He had broken into a dog trot when he turned the bend, stared straight ahead of him and

brought up sharp—with a muffled curse. He was a thin, wiry, little fellow with rounded shoulders, and nervous, clutching fingers that tugged at his coat collar, shaking the water from it as he turned it down. His checked cap was pulled well forward, so that I could not get a good look at his face.

For a moment he gazed along the road, swung suddenly and looked back the way he had come—then he faced the open distant country again. His mouth hung open; a white tongue licked thin lips; two sharp teeth bit down hard; and a hand ran uncertainly across his chin—up over his face as restless fingers rested on the peak of his cap. A single clutch at the misshapen peak and the cap was off. The man half turned—and I saw him.

The Ferret! My lips formed the name which I did not speak. Here was a product of the underworld—an associate, in a way, of former days. I had helped the Ferret more than once. A clever, shrewd little fellow, but one whom I never trusted. Not that the Ferret wouldn't stick to his friends. I had known him to stand the Third Degree, that would weaken much stronger men, without talking—but that was before the police knew his weakness. The Ferret was a snowbird—a user of dope; and deprived of this drug, his whole nature changed so that he became a cringing thing—irresponsible—babbling truth and lies together, in an effort to obtain the drug that his emaciated little body craved. Yet—he wasn't one to betray a friend. He had followed me. Why? To warn me, perhaps.

"Ferret!" I called suddenly, giving him the only name the Avenue knew him by—then I stepped into the road.

He swung sharply and faced me—his little eyes snapped—his fingers twisted together, and his mouth opened and closed twice before he finally got his words out.

"Tracey Rhodes!"

The name came from far back in his throat—and for the first time I realized

that I had a name again, and not a number. The next instant he was on me; both his hands on my shoulders, his pinched little face close to mine; his eyes steady and bright as his hands ran down my arms, passed with a cold chill over my wrists and clutched at my hands. Certainly he was glad to see me.

I regarded him coldly enough, my face hard and stern. Then I relaxed—after all, he was the first human to greet me, and there wasn't any harm—nothing but good in the Ferret when he was himself. So I smiled and returned the grip of those weak little hands.

"It's true that you're going to run straight? It's true that you passed up all visitors in the prison? It's true that—"

And his colorless eyes turned suddenly, shot back down the road. That little face wrinkled, the eyes lost their brilliancy and became those dull, blurred filmy things that I recalled so well. He wet his dry lips now, before he continued. Then he spoke with an effort, his eyes looking vacantly over my shoulder toward the thick trees.

"I got a plant for you, Tracey—a swell plant—an easy one, with a box that a drill would go through like it was papier-maché." And when I didn't speak again he looked down the road, wet his lips, and shot in, "a fairy tale it is—cash—ten thousand—and it must be worked fast—this week."

The eagerness of his voice was feigned, The dullness of his eyes didn't fit in with the rapid-fire anxiety of his tongue. But I shook my head.

"Forget about it Ferret," I said. "I'm out of the running—for good."

He nodded in understanding.

"They all feel that way when they come out. You get a chance to use the conscience in the Big House—I know—I've been there—but I felt it less than the others. My conscience ain't—"

"It isn't the conscience," I cut in with a smile. "It's common sense. Look at the money I've made—and now I've got

only what's in my pocket; the few dollars they gave me at the prison. It isn't a paying game."

"No—maybe not—for me and you. But look at Parsons. There's the two cars, the city house and the summer home, and two or three apartment houses, and money in the bank—to say nothing of the old joint. You got the stuff, Tracey—a year or more of it, done right and on a system, and you could retire."

"There's something besides money." I was thinking of those long nights and the thick bars.

"Yeh—maybe." He blinked up at the sun. "I hadn't thought on that. I've heard tell of it many times but never seen much sense in it. There's women, of course." His face brightened. "Curly, now—you'll be wanting to hear about her and—"

My hands closed tightly, my lips set grimly. The Ferret's eyes met mine and he slunk back, jerking his hands from my grasp and rubbing his wrists.

"I didn't know," he stammered. "You put it into my head. 'Something beside money,' you said. There ain't nothing else—couldn't be."

"There's memory," I told him grimly. "Debts—to be paid—things that aren't forgotten."

"Vengeance—maybe." His head jerked up and down.

"Vengeance, yes." I smiled. I wasn't one to go in for the dramatic.

"You won't be running with the pack, then?" And again there was that eagerness in his voice and a brightness to his eyes.

"I won't be running with the pack," I told him—and meant it.

"And the plant, now—my plant—it's like picking daisies in the field, there." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Molly gay-catted it—you remember Molly—just a kid she was, but a fine young lady now—none finer on the Avenue—plays it big and goes in for lifting high-class rocks. Even Parsons has an eye on her. She's a free-thinker,

is Molly; plays a lone hand and—but you don't want to hear nothing of women."

"I have nothing against women." And seeing the sudden nod of misunderstanding, "or a woman, either—I'm running alone and running straight."

"I hope so—you think so now—but they all do." Then in a hoarse whisper as a big touring car loomed up in the distance, "I'm one to keep my word, Tracey—more I can't say—but play it *honest* and you'll make money."

I didn't quite understand the emphasis in his voice, so I switched the talk.

"And you, Ferret—how's the world been treating you? You look better—less—less nervous."

"You think so—you think so?" he muttered eagerly. "I'm not so pasty—so fidgety, eh? That's good—that's fine. You didn't perhaps notice it, but I used to take a little something for my nerves—snow, you know—not much, you understand—but I'm off it now. Like you, I hope for good."

His eyes seemed to fill as he gazed down the road toward the approaching car. The Ferret was always like that—everyone on the Avenue knew him for a snowbird—yet he always thought it a secret vice which few suspected.

"It was Molly." He rubbed a dirty hand across the back of his mouth. "Somehow she knew—but there ain't no way of getting around Molly."

"You'll be marrying her yet." I smiled down at the shriveled little figure—but he looked seriously enough up at me.

"If she was twenty years older and I was twenty years younger, and—and—. Sh-h—not a word, now."

I followed his eyes. The big touring car had reached the top of the hill and was speeding down the level to the curve where we stood. I stepped back to the side of the road to let it pass, but the Ferret held his ground. The big car slowed down, the brakes screeched and it came to a stop. The man who

stepped out was a stranger to me—but the Ferret knew him—expected him.

The big man closed the door with a bang and crossed the road toward me. He was well dressed but over-dressed—his tie was loud, his shoes a light brown, and his suit a wide, striped check.

"Friend of mine." The Ferret wet his lips before he spoke and his gaze didn't meet mine but wandered about the road. "He found the plant," he whispered to me in a stage whisper—and then, as the stranger stepped forward and reaching for my hand lifted it from my side and shook it vigorously, "you wouldn't know him, Tracey—he's from Chicago."

"Joe Saunders," the man bellowed in a voice that was in tune with his attire—loud and coarse. "Glad to meet you—heard about you—Ferret and Molly—going to interest you."

This lad had the voice, the makeup, and all the outward appearances of a gambler and a crook—but one thing I didn't like. The way he gave me the up and down—a quick general glance at my hands and feet, but his eyes were studying my head. Not just looking into my face, but measuring me—the shape of my head and ears—the width of my forehead and the color of my eyes. Few crooks do that—only the best of them, and then with a far less pronounced scrutiny.

A detective, was my first thought. Whether a private dick or a regular one, I didn't know. Had the Ferret been followed—and why did this man plan to trap me? Were things so slow on the Avenue that a flatty would have to frame a man to send him away? It was done, of course, but never so quickly as this. The police are like other people—there's some who'd go the limit to help a man who wanted to go straight, and some who'd just hound the ex-convict into crime. It's not the force. It's human nature—something that no one can change.

But here was a trained observer, taking my measurements, so to speak.

When we met some other time I might have changed—my hair might be light instead of dark; combed in the middle instead of brushed straight back—and a mustache might be covering my upper lip. But the color of my eyes would be the same, the width of my forehead would not change, nor would the shape of my ears nor the breadth of my nose. No—this fellow was not a crook—he studied his man much as detectives at headquarters do in the daily lineup. He'd know me again when he saw me.

"I've heard about you." And a huge hand with a great signet ring on it fell upon my shoulder. "The Ferret here's talked to you, I guess—we're going to make it right—make it big. Come, jump into the car and we'll drive to the city. I'm a liberal man—you'll be rich. I've got influence and pull. You've been traveling with the wrong people. I need you and you need me. Joe Saunders, they call me."

In a way it was funny. If I had stepped out of jail looking for a partner, a job to pull off, or any kind of easy money—I'd of dodged this bird. He talked crime like a real estate sales manager talks real estate to his salesmen. Maybe he knew his business—maybe it went over big with others. But I had been ten years in the game, with only just one ride. I made a business of it, like any other business. The professional burglar must travel as closely to strict lines and methods of procedure as a stock broker or a lawyer. Once he diverges from the carefully laid path, he pays the price—nothing strange in that. So does the lawyer or the stock broker.

"I am afraid, Mr. Saunders," I couldn't hide the smile, "that you are wasting your confidence. If you had spoken to the Ferret first, he would have explained to you. In fact, he jerked at your coat the moment you approached. Perhaps you misunderstood his signal. I am through with the game—the reason—is my own."

The Ferret turned red, but not so Mr. Saunders.

"But you haven't heard all I have to say. Come! We'll ride to the city, have dinner and a talk—then you are at liberty to go your own way."

"If that is understood I have no objections."

I looked at the big car and at the searching eyes of the man who drove it. After all, why not? I would learn something—anyway, I would enjoy a ride and a good dinner. Either one of which I could not afford for some time to come. Here was a lark, and a good one. I shrugged my shoulders and stepped toward the car. A minute later we were all speeding toward the city.

II

TWO hours later the big car drew up before a brownstone front in the upper Eighties. I followed Saunders up the stone steps with the Ferret coming behind us, rubbing his hands together—his little eyes searching up and down the street. He was a good lookout, was the Ferret, and had laid outside more than one job of mine. He could see things that others couldn't see—but there were times, too, when he saw things that weren't there at all. You had to watch him, study him, and be sure he was "right" when you used him.

The inside of the house was a surprise. Expensively furnished, certainly—but not gaudily, as one would expect to find the home of Joe Saunders. I looked again at the man—for the first time I had misgivings. Were his dress, his speech and gestures all part of a makeup that worked in with his plans? That was possible. Perhaps he was simply a "Pathfinder"—one who hunted up the likely prospects for robbery, and his victims were found at the race track or in the night life of the great city.

I looked him over more closely now. He was older than I had thought. There were streaks of gray in the blackness of his hair, a puffiness beneath his eyes,

and a curl to the thickness of his lower lip that hung slightly at the corners with the weight of heavy jowls that drooped somewhat—just enough to resemble an English bulldog. His gray eyes alone gave the lie to the self-indulgence of his flabby skin and sensuous lips. They were deep, somber, thoughtful eyes—steady and piercing and capable of a direct gaze, though they kept drifting about most of the time. But in them I read all that the face lacked—self-control, strong will, and the steadiness of a man who could stick to a fixed purpose. Despite his loud attire, loud talk and free, easy manner, I marked this Joe Saunders as a man to fear.

"A well-fed man is a reasonable man," Saunders' laugh echoed through the house. "Any housewife knows that. So we'll have our dinner and talk afterwards—not a word now. I shall make you an offer that you can refuse or accept."

We passed through a library and toward thick curtains. I was expected. This was the dining room! The table was set, and a little Japanese servant stood bowing and scraping before the screen which led to the swinging door and the kitchen. I heard the Ferret smack his lips.

"The table, as you see, is set for four." Saunders' voice boomed out when we were seated. "Wine—" he made a lordly gesture toward the many bottles upon the buffet, "the best of food—and—" The doorbell rang suddenly. "The woman!" he exclaimed. Like a dress rehearsal—you must give me credit for being a great stage manager, Mr. Rhodes—the party is complete."

Silently the little Jap passed through the room—the front door opened—a soft feminine voice. Light steps, and Saunders was by the curtains, swinging them back. A young lady stepped into the room, bowed to Saunders and smiled toward the grinning, awkward Ferret. The girl and I faced each other. I knew her and I didn't know her—great soft blue eyes were on me—eyes that

were opening wide in wonder. A little hand came up and pushed back the light hair from a white forehead—then she smiled, and extending both hands, stepped toward me.

"Gentlemen prefer blondes," I heard Saunders laugh.

"Tracey." The girl spoke as she took both my hands, and the soft lines about her mouth hardened. "I didn't know it was to be you—and yet—" Slender, well-formed shoulders shrugged as Saunders took her cape and handed it to the servant.

"Molly—little Molly O'Neil," was the extent of my ability to make conversation as the girl without another word slid into the chair the Jap pulled out for her.

Saunders talked, and the meal progressed. His monologue was of money and the luxuries it could buy. He was a good talker. If, as I thought, it was all meant to tempt me back into the old life, it was well staged. Just one thing stood in the way. My mind once set, nothing will change it. Will power or stubbornness, it makes little difference. Not conscience certainly, or the burning desire to live straight. Most of all, I wanted to protect myself until I had settled my debts with Parsons.

Molly had certainly grown into a beautiful young woman; but in a way the former carefree youth was gone. There was a certain watchfulness in her eyes, a sinister, haunted look that marks the criminal, and I noticed, too, when she bent toward the light, that tiny lines had formed at her mouth—nothing hard or permanent about them—just doubtful, ever guarded caution when Saunders addressed her. Molly was a product of the underworld—a victim of environment—one whose outward appearance is a perpetual mask, and whose inner self is a closed book.

The Ferret did not talk, but ate in hurried gulps, in fear perhaps that the food would disappear before he had his fill. Without our jovial host, it would have been a dead meal indeed. Molly's

wine glass remained untouched—mine I barely sipped. It was good and stimulating, but I had had none in three years. Something was going to break that night—something deeper than I at first thought, and I wanted to be in complete possession of all my faculties.

"The Ferret has told you enough." Saunders leaned across the table, lowering his voice. "As for me, I have nothing to add. The Ferret and the young lady will both vouch for me. But the young lady would talk to you alone—in the next room there. I have nothing to say—nothing to suggest—but I am liberal with my friends. If you agree to work with me, I can advance you some money—say, a thousand dollars tonight, before you leave." His gray eyes were fastened on my face. "If your purpose is to fight down the life you have led, that is your business. You understand the difficulties—I shall not stand in your way. We will await your answer here."

As if the matter had already been arranged, Molly passed from the room. I followed her into the dimly lighted library; glanced quickly at the hall and the thick curtains in the room across. Whispered voices could not be heard in the dining room. Then I spotted the coffee set out upon a little table, on either side of which were two chairs. We were to sit there and talk. I wondered why. Perhaps just the desire of my host to do things right—perhaps for other reasons. I looked for a dictograph disk but saw none.

"Shall we sit here Molly?" I pointed to the two chairs.

"It is for you to decide." She glanced up at me, her head hardly reaching to my shoulder. "But if I were you I'd pick that little balcony there by the French windows—not so warm, perhaps—but safer." And her voice was very low.

"The balcony then," I whispered, and we walked toward it.

Softly I closed the windows behind us, but there was a dull click. Molly

looked up at me sharply. I laughed hollowly. Both of us were thinking the same thing. My fingers had lost some of their old cunning or my mind its old caution.

"You see," I explained, "I intend to go straight." And then with an interest that was real, "and you, Molly—you were going to night school—studying hard. You told me how you were saving money and going to marry a clerk, and live in the country and—have three children." I smiled at the memory—Molly had been such a child and was so certain about the number of children.

"My aunt died, and the clerk got another girl." Molly smiled and her smile was not a good one. "Some day I'll get a home in the country—but it'll be cows, not children. And now—I'm to vamp you and make you go in on the job. But I'd steer clear of it, Tracey—the stage is heavily set, to make you fall. You see, I didn't know it was to be you."

"And the job, Molly. Is it a real one?"

"So real and so easy that I'm suspicious of it. I went through the house for a 'friend' who might buy it." She sighed slightly. "I've never heard of an easier lay—Saunders guarantees there's money in the safe—cash, too. And what's more, the door would fall off that safe if you put a firecracker under it."

"And Saunders—what do you know of him?"

"Nothing—the Ferret found him. But he knew me—knows the Avenue well." And then, after a hasty look at the little court below, she whispered close to my ear, "I've seen Saunders at Parsons—one of the alleys in the rear."

I drew in a deep breath.

"You don't need it, anyway." Molly laid a hand on my shoulder. "Play it alone, Tracey. You never did fit it on the Avenue. You were different from the others, didn't talk and didn't act like them—and I never really knew until you got the jolt."

"But you offered to tote a gun for

me, Molly—even then, when you were little more than a child."

"I never was a child." She shook her head. "There were girls younger than me that were gun-toting molls. I wanted to belong—to be one of the crowd—I liked you and admired you."

"And now you're above that, eh?" And there was a certain bitterness in my voice that I could not control. To know Molly before, and to know her now! There's certain things that take the starch out of a man. The Avenue had stretched out its hand and dragged in another victim.

"And now—" Her smile was a sad and wistful sort of thing, "I'm above that sort of thing—though if you needed a friend, I'd help out."

"Has it paid?" I questioned.

"Paid!" She laughed scornfully. "Enough money has gone through my hands to buy a dozen little places in the country, and today—just broke, as usual—that's why I'm here. And the thrill! That's gone out of it long ago—a physical fear drives you on then. You don't want to be like the wrecks you see most every night. It's a hunted, terrible pit—and you can't climb out of it."

"The police, Molly—they know you?"

"Of course." She nodded. "They always know—but knowledge isn't proof. No—it's not the police who dig the pit deeper. It's your own kind—with jealousy and hatred and distrust, and a touch of beast-like selfishness. You help one friend and a dozen jump down on you. You've got to pay and pay, for protection. The more you make, the more you pay—until your debts pile up and the criminal world drives you on to the waiting prison. It's Parsons—always Parsons—somehow I never ran with the pack. He can only see a woman as a tool and a plaything, and not as an ally.

"It's funny, isn't it?" she ran on. "There are the women of the streets and of the night—we look down on them and they look down on us who toil while they live in idleness. The laws of God

and the laws of man are strangely different. But the laws weren't made for the poor, Tracey—they were made for the rich."

"Why don't you give it all up, Molly, and—" I stopped short. The incongruity of my statement struck me forcibly. I had just come out of stir. But she didn't seem to notice it.

"Why don't the swimmer in the whirlpool swim ashore?" She shook those somber shoulders, and with it her heavy mood. "And we've talked long enough. I always looked up to you, Tracey. You were kind to me, respected youth and discouraged crime. It's just that you didn't practise what you preached. But you saved many a one from Parsons. Come—I'll give you your warning and slip back into the night." And her lips set hard. "If you must play the game, play it alone."

A little hand slipped into mine; another rested on my shoulder; the fragrance of soft hair brushed across my cheek; blue eyes glistened wet for a moment in the dull light from the room behind—and she was gone, slipping open the French windows and disappearing into the night—yes, into the blackness of perpetual night. Molly was feeling the weight that she carried, as we all must feel it. There was that in her eyes which made me think.

I stood so a moment. Molly was still very young, very beautiful, and very good. Good! Certainly. To others—outsiders, those who attend to their business every day or their household duties, it may be hard to understand. But Molly lived in another world. Like thousands of others—scorned and unprotected people—she, too, was a product of the night.

III

MORE than ever I was determined to go straight—and more than ever I was determined to have it out with Parsons. Not because of Molly or the hundreds he had dragged down

to make his willing or unwilling tools, but simply because of a selfish desire for vengeance. Those not fit to live should die. If any man deserved death, that man was Parsons. But there is something repulsive about murder—we can let the State do it willingly enough in legal murders, but for the individual—no—something good or weak would hold me back. I knew that—but if it came to hasty words and a quick draw—then—I clenched my hands and wondered.

A blurred figure was at the swinging doors—more lights had gone up in the library beyond. The gruff voice of Saunders came to me.

"Come in, Mr. Tracey Rhodes." And as I stepped into the room, "the young lady tells me that your feet are set on the path of virtue and righteousness. A very laudable resolve, to be sure, and one to be highly commended. But—" his finger shot suddenly out and pounded against my chest, "there are other things to consider." There was a sneer on his lips now which he made no attempt to hide. "You were convicted of one crime, yet there are rumors of many. If one could lay a hand to; point a finger to, another little indiscretion, perhaps you would see my side of the case and—fall in with my plans. Do I make myself clear?"

He did, and I nodded grimly.

"I don't think," I said slowly, "that you could lay your finger on any other crime—and if you did—but look up my record in the past and you will see that I pay my debts and strike back."

"Ah!" A huge hand stroked his flabby chin. "I may take that as a threat?"

"You may." I tried to control my anger.

"You would kill a man—perhaps." And his eyes were hard—bright and intelligent.

"Perhaps." My eyes never dropped.

"There is Al Parsons," he said very slowly. "Alive and well and rich and happy."

"I have been out of jail a few hours only." More I would not say.

My eyes searched the room. Saunders and I were alone. Molly had gone and the Ferret, too. Who was this man? Was he an emissary of Al Parsons? Was this a trap? It would be like Parsons to have me done in that big house. But Molly and the Ferret would both know, when the crime was discovered. The Ferret might be successfully silenced. But Molly—no—she had spirit and—Saunders was talking.

"I have talked freely." Those gray eyes watched me. "In a way I have placed myself in your hands. Suppose you knew that to refuse to work with me now might mean your death—suppose I repented of my rash action in bringing you here?"

Was he talking for time? I watched him closely—his right hand was slipping beneath his coat, fumbling there—creeping toward his hip. For an instant those gray eyes left my face—and I acted. Just a step and a lunge forward, and I had him—one hand on his right wrist, the other at his throat.

I knew that my strength probably wouldn't be as great as his—that despite his flabby body he was a powerful man and that my muscles were loose and flabby from three years of clerical work inside the great walls. But I figured on that—twisted his body as I grabbed him, and heaving him sideways, forced him back toward the table—against the chair which stood there.

The chair went over—the grasp of a frantic hand about my neck, and he lurched forward, caught his feet in the fallen chair, and we crashed to the floor together. Things happened quickly after that. I knew that Saunders cursed and that feet pounded in the room behind me—many feet, and the voices of men; and I was violently jerked from the struggling bulk beneath me.

Two men held my arms—three others stood about the room—uncertain, awkward men. Neither the police nor gun-

men from the underworld! plain ordinary business men they seemed—looking vacantly from one another to the rising form of Joe Saunders. I braced myself for the expected blow as Saunders came to his feet. And the blow didn't come—nor did a flow of oaths break loose. The big man laughed.

"Gentlemen," he said—paused a moment while he sought breath, then, "this is the man you want—and a mighty lucky thing that they don't supply all released prisoners with guns—though to my way of thinking, that's all the prison deprives them of today."

I looked blankly around the room. One of the men was absently straightening the chair, another was consulting his watch—looking doubtfully at it, as if he had never seen it before in his life. The others looked from me to Saunders. It was a man who held my arm who broke the silence.

"Perhaps—er—Mr. Saunders, you had better enlighten this man as to our real purpose in bringing him here. And remember—we, or at least I, do not countenance violence."

"Good." Saunders mopped his forehead with a huge handkerchief while I looked on bewildered—straightening my coat as the five men found seats, pulling chairs close to the table. Uninvited, I too sat down while Saunders talked—and I'm ready to admit that I found what he said interesting indeed.

"Our conversation, or rather my conversation, Mr. Tracey Rhodes, has much to do with one Al Parsons. These gentlemen here are merchants, and each one has suffered—not once, but many times, from the activities of this same Parsons. I know that—they know it now—the police have failed; other merchants have paid heavy duty to protect their stores. Everything is done openly and above board. The Atlanta Protective Agency is licensed to do business in this city. They bill their clients a reasonable amount for their services—what those clients pay extra and above that is not found on the books—nor is the money

collected by bona-fide representatives of the company. Those who pay, say nothing—those who do not, complain to the police. The police are helpless to protect all. That the Atlanta Protective Agency and Al Parsons are one cannot be proved. That the Atlanta Protective Agency does not protect its clients is a far cry from the truth—they do.

"At first this form of extortion was confined to speak-easies, questionable pawn shops and gambling houses. It has now, however, become city wide and reaches out to the more respectable businesses. These five men are property owners in this city; they are public-spirited men," the five straightened somewhat, "besides that, rents are falling. I have been employed by these men to bring the head of this syndicate of organized crime to justice. And let me tell you this, Mr. Tracey Rhodes," his hand came down upon the table, "I could lay my hands on a good twenty now—two of whom, at least, who could be convicted of murder. But this will not break up the gang—get the real leader. All trails lead to the doors of Al Parsons—and there the trail stops. To know a thing and to prove that thing in a court of law are two different matters."

"I know that," I nodded.

"So—if you'll pardon the old adage—set a thief to catch a thief. You worked with Parsons—you were smooth and clever; yet the time came when you paid the price. Why? So that Parsons wouldn't. You have decided to go straight—although you were a crook in the past, your activities along the Avenue have been ones of help. You have saved more than one—encouraged youth to go straight, and tried to make it a better place to live on. We want your help and are willing to pay for it. Thus the test that you really meant to go straight."

The man was in deadly earnest now and his thick jowls seemed to have filled out, the pouches beneath his eyes to have lessened, and the grayness of the pupils

were bright and alive as he leaned forward, one hand on the table.

"I've been a crook myself," I told him. "I want to pay a debt to Parsons, but I don't know—I hadn't thought of turning against those that I lived with, ate with, and worked with."

"But you'd like to help them, and in so doing settle your account with Parsons—wouldn't you? Do you know that he's feeding children into the penitentiaries, making the underworld what it was ten or fifteen years ago? Do you know that he is smuggling in drugs that his hirelings, the filthy scum of his organization, are peddling to children? If you do not believe me, look up the reports of the various children's societies. Go back to your old haunts and see the changes that have taken place in the few years you were away. You want to go straight yourself—don't you want others to have a chance? Man, I've been down there and I know—look at the faces."

And I thought of Molly and what the three years had done to her. The sinister look in those formerly laughing young eyes, the little lines that crept around her mouth, and the harshness of her words when she spoke of Al Parsons and the grip of the underworld; those octopus-like arms that once they encircle a young, healthy body never let go. I wanted to go straight. I wanted to pay my debt to Parsons, and here was my chance—

"Well?" The voice of Saunders came from a long way off—the five men in the background seemed faded, distant figures.

"No one else but Parsons is to pay for what I can learn—what I can bring to you—is that it?" I questioned.

"No one else through you. Those that I have already listed, when the time comes to strike, must pay too."

I wet my dry lips. It was a momentous decision. A rat and a spy and a stool-pigeon—all such epithets would be hurled at me.

"How do I know that you'll play fair

with me? Will you give me a list of those you've already marked?" I asked.

"You can't cure the ills of backward thinking by locking people up behind walls," I told him.

"I can't do that." He shook his head. "I can't trust you. I've built up this net-work only after two years of hard work; there's arson and murder and robbery and vicious assault, and with each one I can make out a case that will carry a conviction."

"You have reached as far as Parsons," I questioned him; "yet you can't pin anything on him—why?"

"He suspects me now—but like me, he too lacks the proof."

And then I decided. I don't think it was selfishness. I could have walked straight into Parsons' place, put my hand toward my hip and started the fireworks, thus settling my score with him one way or another. I'll always concede every man the right to go to hell in his own way—but to drag others, that was another thing, indeed. My fingers clenched—my lips set grimly and my eyes narrowed.

Joe Saunders studied my face and nodded in understanding.

"There is pay for it, of course. Five men are willing to pay two thousand dollars apiece for information that will lead to the arrest and conviction of Parsons—there will be a thousand now, and—"

I interrupted him.

"Let me put it another way," I said grimly. "The pay will be for breaking up, or helping to break up, the activities of Al Parsons. In other words," I spoke very slowly, "the elimination of Al Parsons. Correct? I raised my head quickly and faced the five men.

"Correct!" Saunders said quickly. "We will talk alone. These men are simply here that you may verify the truth of my story—look each one up and you'll find him a respected member of the community."

There was the semblance of a sneer in his voice. I think that I understood the

situation. They were the owners of property, whose rent was high but whose tenants could not stand police investigation. In a way that was clever of Parsons. But I wasn't thinking of them, but of the thin peaked-faced children who would never have a chance.

At a sign from Saunders the five men filed from the room, each one placing a neat pile of bills upon the table. I watched them go, heard the door close—then turned to Saunders.

"Why the stage setting—was it simply to tempt me? What would have happened if I had accepted your offer to rob that house? Would that have meant the end of it?"

"Hardly." He shook his head. "We would have formed an alliance then—if you went back with Parsons you'd have carried a good recommendation for me. Perhaps I might have overcome his suspicions later."

"There must be a lot in this for you." I was counting over the money upon the table—five stacks of four hundred dollars each.

"There is—lots in it for me." And the earnestness of his voice was more than the hope of finishing a difficult case warranted. "Somehow, Tracey Rhodes, I believed you meant to go straight. I have known about you for two years—the right thinking people on the Avenue remember you well. You were a crook certainly—yet the stench was not there. Organized crime is one thing—a thing that can be fought—but organized rottenness and depravity is another thing. I daresay you'll go to see Parsons. I can't advise you how to act—but I feel sure that you'll play me fair. I'll always help—greater help than you imagine." His voice was low now—refined. That gruff, vulgar good-fellowship had gone out of it. "You wanted a chance to make good—here it is."

I didn't speak. He led me to the door and slipped a bit of paper into my hand.

"My phone number—here!" he said. Another moment of silence, and then:

"You'll go and see Parsons," he whispered as I faced the street and looked up toward the myriad of lights—and Broadway.

"I'll go and see Parsons," I told him. "Tonight."

IV

AL PARSONS' place, in outward appearance, was only one of the many night clubs which had sprung up since prohibition. It was back of that white tabled dance floor that Parsons' place differed from the others. Bootlegging, high jacking, and plain crime had filled his pockets with money and his mind with the dominant thought that a man with money can do anything. So far, he had been right. No liquor was sold by the house, no gambling was permitted in his establishment. But in the secrecy of those back rooms, criminals met—silent, somber, shrewd men—who knew that the mind and the money and the power behind Al Parsons would protect them. It was said that he made and broke politicians, and from my own knowledge this was no idle talk. He had only to raise his hand to save me—and he didn't. Just why I wasn't sure—yet—

I swung open the outer door and passed through the darkened hallway to the little door within. Faintly the strum of the jazz came up to me—the humming, distant tattoo of the trap drums as I knocked on the inner door. There was no panel in this door, where a guard could look out and identify his customer. Still, I knew as I stood beneath the dim light that eyes were watching me—from the darkened side wall a strip of wood would slide back. Al Parsons' place was open and above board—an air of respectability and a bank roll was the card of admittance. The door swung open almost at once and I stepped into the little anteroom.

The man in evening dress was a stranger to me. His face was white beneath the brighter light, and it was easy

to see that the watcher in the hall had signaled him in some way.

"I'll be wanting a private room—upstairs." I swung off my coat and tossed it over my arm. My tuxedo was new—expensive, and a remarkable fit considering the fact that my tailor had been jerked from his little back room less than two hours before.

"Name!" the man stammered as his gaze fell to my hands and remained there.

He had been warned of my coming then—and he understood my request for a private room—knew that I had asked for an audience with Al Parsons himself. Perhaps too he knew my reputation and held a slight personal fear.

"Name!" he repeated. The color was returning to his cheeks, but there was still a huskiness to his voice.

"Mr. Rhodes—Tracey Rhodes." I nodded, swinging my cane across my arm. "And I'm rather in a hurry—a private room—upstairs."

He set his lips tightly, offered to take my coat and stick—then drew back his hands.

"I might leave suddenly," I said—and I smiled.

"Certainly—certainly." He pressed a button and a boy stepped from an alcove at the left.

"Mr. Rhodes wishes a private room—you may take him to Room D." Then he repeated, "Room D."

With a bow and smile, I turned and followed the boy. His body was young but his face was old—there was a furtive look in his eyes—darting, sharp little glances shot back over his shoulder as he preceded me up the stairs and down a narrow corridor.

"Room D." He sprang a knob and threw open a door—then closing his fingers about the coin I slipped into his hand disappeared down the hall again. I heard his feet patter into silence, then I stepped into the room, closing the door behind me. It was small and empty. I sat down at a table and waited

—not once did I put my hands toward my hip pocket where a newly bought gun rested.

Five—ten minutes passed, and feet echoed along the corridor—feet that came from the rear of the building. I stretched a hand out before me and nodded in satisfaction. The fingers did not tremble. My heart raced the faster but not with fear—just the thrill of the coming encounter. I was about to beard the most feared man on the Avenue in his own den. I wondered how many others would chance it—chance it with the same thoughts in their head and the same hatred in their hearts that I held.

I never turned as the slight draught struck my back; the door had opened so quietly that I didn't hear it.

"Ah—Meester Rhodes." A soft voice spoke behind me—a feminine voice—yet I knew it was a man before I turned. I came to my feet, spun about and extended a hand. This was Gastonia, the clever little Sicilian who was always very close to Al Parsons.

"Gaston," I cut the name short as I stretched out my hand to him. He took it awkwardly, doubtfully. "How's Parsons?" I asked. "Got out today, and wish to see him."

"Yes?" He was studying my face. "Meester Parsons, he worries much about you—never did you communicate with him—though he still remember hez friend and use much influence with the parole board. It ez so, and you are free. We are glad." But he made no mention of my seeing Parsons.

"Parsons was expecting me—maybe." I was digesting that parole board statement—perhaps it was true—certainly Parsons would have use for me—need me—but under the circumstances I was more than doubtful of my reception.

"Expecting you—maybe, as you say," Gaston ran on. "Some place else beside here. You misunderstand him and come with some bitterness—that is true?"

"Listen, Gaston," my eyes narrowed, "I came to see Parsons—what business

I may have is with him. Does he know I'm here?"

"He knows everything." And for the moment Gaston's voice was hard. "You wish to see him—now?"

"Now." I looked him straight in the eyes. And with a twist of my mouth, a hidden meaning that Gaston could interpret any way he wished, "unless there is some reason why Parsons doesn't wish to see me."

Gaston eyed me for a long time after that speech. Then he shook his little shoulders.

"But of course he would see you. Why not? He is not one quickly to forget a friend." And stepping aside to let me pass out the door, "you shall lead the way, perhaps—it is familiar to you, like memories of merry hours."

"The study?" I questioned, as without hesitancy I stepped before the little man and walked briskly down the hall.

"The study—yes."

Twice he overtook me and bumped against me in the dimness. I made no complaint. I knew that he was frisking me for a gun—and he knew that I knew it.

A long hall, a turn to the right, a narrow flight of stairs with an open door at the top and a closed one at the bottom—and we were outside Al Parsons' office. I paused and faced Gaston.

"You go in." He nudged me, and that nudge was as if he proved his calculations that I had a gun; both pockets had been tapped again. Gaston was a thorough man.

Feet passed up the stairs behind me—the door closed at the top, a lock snapped home and I was alone there on the tiny flight of steps between the two doors. I didn't hesitate. I twisted the knob of the door before me, knocked lightly and expecting to find it locked thrust forward. The door gave—I jerked back sharply, then stepped into Parsons' study. I was either trapped or Parsons was mighty sure of himself—or of me.

The door sprang closed behind me—

I blinked in the sudden light. There at the far end of the room, behind a wide flat desk, sat Al Parsons. The inevitable long thick unlighted cigar, which he was never seen to smoke or even to chew, hung from his lips. It straightened slightly as he watched me—gleaming, rat-like eyes glared with animal-like intensity from below thick shaggy brows. A horse-shoe of diamonds glittered in his modest brown tie. This single display was Parsons' only gaucheness. He didn't speak, and I didn't speak—we eyed each other and waited.

Finally his hand shot out from beneath the desk, motioned me to a chair about five feet from the desk and slightly to his right; then his other hand crept on the desk. Both his hands were in full view now—and empty. As I reached the chair, he stretched his right hand toward me, but I ignored it and sat down. I'd laid my plans well. I'd be a fool not to know that Parsons had let me go to jail. And he would be a fool not to know that I knew it.

Casually I looked about the room. Thick curtains hung from ceiling to floor, entirely covering the walls. There were doors there of course—more than once I had left by one of them—but no one knew how many doors and passages led from that room. It was whispered among the boys that Parsons' study had more exits than a Swiss cheese.

He must have been sure of himself to sit there like that. I glanced over his shoulder—and involuntarily drew erect in the chair. I couldn't withhold the slight start—I don't think he knew the cause of it. It was only luck—only by chance that my eyes rested upon those curtains and the narrow slit that divided them. But I saw it—or felt it, or anyway just knew it. A man was behind them—a man who glued his eye close to the long slit and who held in his hand a gun. For the fraction of a second those curtains had moved and I had caught the outline of the gun. Now it was gone but the crack was still there and the gun too; just slipped back

further in the darkness. My teeth set tightly—the music came faintly from the front of the house and slightly above us—we were just below the level of the street. A fine place for a bit of killing—other men had died in that room; at least men had entered it who were never seen again. Parsons' assurance was easily explained now. At the first false move the man behind the curtains would shoot. And he wouldn't miss. Parsons didn't use men who missed. Still, I hadn't walked into a trap unknowingly. I knew that most anything might happen, and that I gripped death by the hand when I faced Al Parsons.

"Well?" Parsons finally broke the silence, jerking the cigar up with his lips and setting it back between his teeth—a familiar trick, that—and one that spelled danger. "You came to see me, you know. With a purpose."

"Yes—I came to see you. With a purpose." And it took an effort to get out my final sentence, with that gun covering me. "I came for an explanation."

"And—and heeled?" His eyes closed to two narrow slits.

"And heeled," I answered, but I kept my hands on my knees.

"That would be like you, Tracey—and I don't blame you. Things did look black." He came to his feet now; long, stooped, broad shoulders, with a narrow waist and heavy muscular arms which swung back and forth.

"I'm a hard man—but a good friend." He jerked his head emphatically that there was no denying *that*. "I couldn't write it all in a letter."

He paced up and down the room but never passed between the man behind the curtains and me. If the story he was going to tell didn't go over well, he wanted to give his hired murderer plenty of chance for a clear shot.

He talked well—the man had an air of sincerity about him. Yet I knew that he lied. I was simply listening to his story, trying to pick holes in it, and

wondering if he would expect me to believe it. That was it! I didn't want him to suspect me—suspect my motive in coming there.

"You were caught and it looked as if I deserted you. That's it, isn't it?" And when I nodded, he went on. "In a way I did—but for your own good. There was a job and you pulled it. There had been shifts at headquarters that made things more than uncertain—your alibi might be broken—and then what? Well, Mr. Tracey Rhodes, there was a murder in Brooklyn that very night. A trap! a halucination! call it what you will—but two cops were willing to swear they saw you hold up the man and fire the shots that killed him. Which was it to be—murder, or a simple burglary? Conviction for burglary was your best alibi. Let me tell you—"

There was a lot more to it, of course—and it was a good story. Told convincingly and easy enough for a man to believe, if he wanted to believe it. And that's how Parsons was sizing me up. Did I want to believe him—did I want to work with him, occasionally, again?

"It wasn't like you, Parsons, to throw me over." I looked up at him. "But I had reasons for my doubts. There was Morrow—who came to the Tombs and said you'd fix things if I'd join in with you steady."

"I know," he said, laying a hand upon my shoulder. "Morrow did other things too—Morrow is dead." Was there a warning in his voice—just a friendly warning, or a threat?

"It rang true though." My voice was half apologetic, half defiant—for my position was a tough one. "You often tried to get me in with you."

"Always did—always will, Tracey. You had queer ideas, that was all. Crime is crime and no man must make a distinction or divide it into subdivisions of good and bad. You need money now." He slipped open a drawer in his desk and shot his fingers within. But he didn't fully trust me. I guess Par-

sons didn't fully trust anyone. Always he kept the space open between that hidden gun and me.

"Yes—yes—I need money, I suppose." It wouldn't do to flash a roll so soon after leaving stir.

"Here!" He tossed a roll of bills on the desk without even counting them

I hesitated—then:

"No obligations attached to it?"

"It's a lot of money." He nodded. "I'm liberal, Tracey—but I've never made any claim to being charitable. I expect to receive service for what I pay."

"I've always run alone." I came to my feet and slid back nearer the curtain behind me. Somehow, I couldn't take his money.

"It'll be harder now, Tracey—much harder." A long arm suddenly shot out and a great hand rested on my shoulder. "They'll be watching you—following you—dragging you in most any day. I think a word in the right direction might call them off. Think it over—I'm rich now—got something big—very big. I've never forgotten you. Go above—see life—live—Curly'll be there. I've sort of taken care of her since you left." And then half in braggadocio and a confidence that was not feigned, "Look at me. You know as much about me as most men. I could sit here for hours and tell you things—give you dates and facts and amounts, and then what? Why, with it all at your finger tips you could prove nothing against me. Take a rise to yourself and run with the pack."

He half pushed me, half led me to the door, and I stepped back into the hall. The door was open above now—opened as Parsons' door closed. I found my way up the stairs, along the hallway and to the front stairs—a turn to the right—a nod from the head-waiter, and I stepped across the dance floor.

V

A HAND tugged at my coat. I turned. Up to that moment I had been very sure of myself—my face had

lost none of its color. Now, I felt the blood rush from cheek to cheek—I was staring down into the white, babyish face of the girl of my past—Curly White.

"Tracey." Her small red lips lisped the words slightly and her great brown eyes were staring up at me. "You haven't forgotten Curly—you haven't—"

My lips opened but no words came. I jerked my jacket from her grasp, turned—then stopped dead. Her voice came to me again.

"Won't you sit down a little minute, Tracey boy—you—can't have forgotten—have really cared, maybe."

And the "really cared" got me. I turned and faced her, dropped into the vacant seat there near the door—and even took the soft little hand that she held out to me.

"It's Curly, isn't it?" I tried surprise, but I knew it didn't register very well.

"Curly, isn't it?" She repeated my words, her lips forming a pout. "Have I changed so much—older?"

"You haven't changed at all." And that was the truth. "My memory is not so good—that is all."

Her hand stretched across the table—rested on mine and remained there.

"Just that one bitter letter from you, Tracey—it made little Curly's heart ache—you never let me—and I would gladly have visited you if you had wanted me."

"It's not a pleasant place for a girl even to visit, Curly. I was thinking of you, you know." I was watching her face; the voice of the past—the longing to hold Curly in my arms again—the sweet baby voice and the lure of those great brown eyes that had haunted me in prison were gone. Funny that—I was taking our meeting the way I wished to take it, yet never believed that I could. I wondered if my feeling of indifference was a simulated thing—or— But she was talking.

"You're angry—you don't care for little Curly any more; and I've thought of no one else since—you thought I broke faith with you—because I was

friendly with—with Parsons and the pack."

"You broke your promise to me, you know."

"I did." Her eyes closed and her head went back. "But I won't tell you why now—somehow, you've changed, and you don't deserve the truth—you'd only condemn; not forgive, appreciate and understand—just condemn."

Her little hands clenched for a moment upon the table—her eyes remained closed; then opened again, and she was smiling—a sad sort of smile. But somehow Curly didn't effect me as she used to.

"You'll eat with me for old times sake," she said. And I nodded. Why not?

But the supper was never ordered. A thin figure detached itself from the dancers, crossed the room, and dragging up a chair sat down. It was Molly.

She spoke rapidly.

"You're back again—back with Parsons and the pack and the girl friend." She lighted a cigarette and blew the smoke toward Curly.

"Two's company." Curly smiled over at her but she bit her lip. Somehow the baby talk didn't impress me now. Her skin was softer than Molly's—her face more innocent and childish; but, strangely enough, Molly lost nothing in the comparison.

"Sure," Molly nodded. "Make tracks then—you dumped him over for Parsons—now he's open game." She turned to me. "I want to speak to you alone, Tracey—in the hall."

She came to her feet, and without waiting for my reply stepped out into the narrow passage that led to the main cloak floor and the front door.

"Just a minute, Curly." I excused myself, and followed Molly.

"How did you come out with the big boy—Saunders?" Molly questioned, as soon as we were alone in the hall.

"All right." She had pinned me there in a corner, both her hands grasping at my coat—her blue eyes searching mine.

"You're coming back—the straight game don't go, eh?"

"No—I'm not coming back. I'm just —" And I stopped. "I don't think I'm coming back." Somehow I couldn't get the lie directly over to Molly. Great stuff too for a man who'd just decided that he was through with women forever.

"Well—don't trust Baby-Face. I won't run down any woman—but she's been as close to Parsons as anyone could get. Another thing, Tracey—watch her—she's got the face men fall for and pay for. Parsons rode you on her account, and—"

"Why, Molly." I laughed, but there was little mirth in my laugh. "One would almost think you're jealous."

"Why not?" Blue eyes snapped. "I loved you when I was a kid, before you went away and—" Her face was very close to mine. For the moment I was stunned—her eyes were very serious and—but they shone suddenly, and she laughed. "You're ripe for the first woman who puts a baby hand in yours, Tracey—I want you to do something for me. It's the Ferret—he's snowed up again."

"The Ferret," I gasped. "Why, he told me—"

"I know—I know," she cut in. "He has told me too—fifty times at least. And what's more, he always believes it. But this time I hoped—it's been weeks. Curly gave it to him."

"Molly!" I shook her by the shoulders. "She didn't—you don't mean that. All Saunders' talk of Parsons and his dope and—Curly—it wasn't possible."

"Well, maybe I shouldn't say that, Tracey—but I hate her—and she gave him something—I saw her. Hunt him up and fetch him home—he's down at Wong's, I guess."

I nodded. I knew Wong's.

"And his home," I asked, "same old place?"

"Same old place—I'll watch near the corner. He'll come with you."

"All right, Molly," I told her, and

without a thought for the girl waiting at the table, I took my hat and coat and passed out onto the Avenue.

Dark there—the great elevator pillars rearing up in the middle of the street, the distant lights of stations, and the occasional rattle and rumbling of the trains. Wong's would be well down town. I grabbed a cruising taxi and jumped in.

ONE hour later I stood before the dingy little tenement that housed the Ferret—Molly turned from the corner and greeted me.

"No luck?" she gasped.

"He wasn't at Wong's," I told her. "Hadn't been there."

She bit her lip.

"Let's go above and have a look."

"You wait here," I told her.

But she followed me up the dark, ill-smelling stairway. There was a light on every other floor only. The worn stairs creaked, the old bannister wobbled beneath my hand. Once the shrill cry of a child and the screeching song of a drunken mother. We reached the top floor, kicked a cardboard box aside and passed to the back of the dirty hall. Molly was close behind; her hand stretched out and rested on my sleeve. Faintly I could see her in the dim light as I glanced over my shoulder. My hand raised to tap upon the door.

"Don't knock—slip the door open. I feel queer, Tracey—like something had happened." The hand upon my arm trembled.

I felt it, too, as I pushed the door open.

"Here—a pocket flash." Molly shoved it into my hand—I shot a beam of light around the room—the bed in the corner.

It wasn't much of a room, and it was empty. We stepped within—the flash lighted up the walls—there were many pictures. I whistled softly. The pictures were not the kind I expected—country scenes; brooks and trees and animals. The Ferret certainly had an eye for beauty.

"I didn't know he went in for art." And my laugh sounded forced and harsh.

"He didn't." Molly's voice was very low. "I—got them for him."

"Molly." I swung sharply—the light flashed into her eyes.

She half backed away, shielding her face from the glare, and her foot struck the closet door. Something rattled within—the knob clicked as if a hand had turned it.

There wasn't any thought—no conscious thought anyway; just the voice of the past. My gun jerked into my hand. I thrust Molly behind me. The closet door had opened a crack and vibrated slightly, as if a hand held it, or the wood was warped.

"Someone in the closet." I thought aloud as I faced the door. "Stay here, Molly—I'll open it."

I stretched forth a hand, clutched the knob, and the door jerked out at me. I held my gun steady, stepped back—and the door swung quickly open. My gun flashed forward, then dropped to my side—I gasped. Molly stifled the scream on her lips. I caught the sharp spasmodic intake of her breath. A limp body fell forward from the narrow closet and slumped to the floor with a sickening thud.

Mechanically my flashlight dropped and shone upon the white shrunken little face—the staring sightless eyes. It was the Ferret. I knelt down, raised one hand—it was still warm, but the man was dead. He was a bad sight when I looked closer, turning the body over. A long knife was still buried to the hilt in his heart.

Molly was sobbing behind me—staggering toward the door. I came to my feet—followed her—reached the hall and put an arm about her as she slumped against the wall.

"And that's the game—that's life—that's the Avenue," she sobbed hysterically, as her hands came up and clung to my shoulder. "It's death, Tracey—we read about it and hear about it— and

—we don't care. Oh, Tracey, he didn't have a chance—he—he wasn't bad—not on the inside. Do you believe that God would drag that poor helpless little soul into hell? I—I—"

"Don't, Molly." Her head was buried on my chest, her frail little body was close to mine—I could feel her chest heave and her heart beat loudly—or was it my heart?

I didn't know what to do—I was helpless. I stroked her hair and talked to her as I might have talked to a child. She just clung to me, crying softly. I knew that our situation was dangerous—yet I did nothing.

"Buck up, Molly," I told her over and over. "We must go—get away from here. People such as—as we can't run screaming into the street that murder has been done. We've got to go—slink off into the night."

"Into the night." She echoed my words. "Always into the night. I can't stand it any longer, Tracey. You were good to me when I was a kid—I loved you then—I love you now—I want you and need you and—. Take me away, Tracey—some place, any place where it isn't all blood and hate and—and murder."

The hall was very dark, my heart was very heavy, and my nerves shot to pieces. Besides, that little head was close to me—a hot cheek pressed against my face. Two hands dragged my head down—and—I just held her in my arms—as a man holds a woman, I suppose—at least, one woman. Soft lashes left burning tears on my cheeks; there was no gripping, overpowering fragrance of perfume or powder—no searching, alluring eyes—just the presence of a lovely—And lips sought mine—sought them and met them—and held them. I drew her close to me.

VI

FOOTSTEPS on the stairs—creaking, uncertain feet there below us. Both our heads turned together. Molly's sobbing ceased, her eyes shone mistily

wet there in the dull light. But the training of years was strong—neither of us spoke. Her hands slid from around my neck to my shoulders—then dropped, the left seeking my wrist—gripping it there—steady. Like two animals we crouched silently, closer to that door. I stretched out a hand, caught the knob and pulled the door closed—not a sound but the faintest squeak of rusty hinges.

The feet reached the landing below—paused a moment. Breathlessly we waited, my hand again reaching for that door. If those steps came up, we'd have to step back into that room—where the Ferret lay. We both knew it. I could feel Molly's body stiffen—self preservation is the first law of the Avenue as well as of Nature—she was steeling herself to pass in with that dead thing.

A few seconds only, yet they seemed like hours—then the unsteady tread of feet again—the click of an uncertain key in a lock—the scratch of a match—a low curse and the slam of a door, followed by the angry voice of a woman. We breathed easier. The man had entered a room on the floor below.

"We'll go out separately," Molly whispered. "You first—I'll watch here by the door. They'd hang a thing like this on you quick enough. Me? It wasn't a woman's job."

She spoke the truth—but I wouldn't let her stay there alone. Together we passed down the stairs—avoiding each other's eyes. It wasn't the Ferret—the murder—or the ghastly reaction to the finding of the body. Something deeper than that—we were afraid to see, or perhaps not to see, something in the other's face. Cautiously we reached the ground floor.

"Is there a back entrance?" I questioned.

"Yes," she nodded in the dark, "back of the stairs. You have to know it, though—it's rough going—the cans rattle like—like funeral bells. You'd never—"

"You take the back and I'll take the

front," I told her. "And—may I see you at Parsons'—just to know—that you get there?"

"We'll go together—stick—"

"No." I shook my head. "It's better to separate—for a time, Molly." And my hand went out and rested on her shoulder.

"Separate and forget," she said. "Forget."

"But I don't want to forget, Molly—I don't think I could forget. We'll give it all up and go and—"

"We can't—we can't," she cried softly. "I've seen the animals in their cages—that's us, Tracey—chained to the life—there is never a chance." And then suddenly. "there's only one way to do it—and that is, to do it." Senseless at first, but real logic when you thought it over. "We'll go now, Tracey—tonight. I have some money—a very little—and if you mean it—if you mean it—Will you go—with me—now?"

My answer was to stretch out my arms. Hers, to creep into them—and then came reason. My hand-shake with Saunders—my promise to him—my debt to Parsons—but most of all the faces of the children; tiny, pinched, hungry faces, that were fast taking on the wolf-like features. I saw them plainly—just motion pictures of an excited brain.

"Later, Molly—later—but surely."

"Later!" She broke in on me. "Never—we've been fools to think of it. There's something always calls—always drags you back, and then it's too late. I understand, Tracey—kiss me again and we'll forget."

She stretched up on her toes, kissed me quickly, and was gone—slipping out the partly open door in the rear.

I followed her to the door, opened my mouth to call, and closed it again with a snap. For a moment I stood there, watching the fleeting shadow that passed through the litter of cans in the back of the tenement! Lost her for a bit—saw the figure again on the high fence and thought that I caught the wave of a white hand. Then she was gone

—into the night—the perpetual night.

What was the chain, the lure, or the grip that held one to such a life? What could? Nothing could be worse—nothing more loathsome and hateful—shrewd minds and mean hearts and blackened souls. No—nothing to hold one—yet, I was there—called back at the very gates of the prison. Molly was right. The only way to do it is to do it. I should have gone—taken her. And I clenched my hands. The Ferret had said I was through with all women—but the Ferret was dead. I shrugged my shoulders, pulled my coat around my white bosomed shirt, and sauntered out into the tenement entrance.

Few people passed along the sidewalk—those who did gave little attention to that shabby doorway. A policeman flat-footed his way slowly across the street, trying doors and peering casually into the lighted interior of dingy shops. A creature of the night slunk close to shadows of an elevated pillar as he jerked at his sweater and pulled down his dirty cap. His face was rat-like, his eyes searched the movements of the cop as he puffed on a cigarette that hung flat and poorly rolled, from the thick lips.

The policeman passed the corner—the gentleman of the sweater bent his neck far to watch the officer's movements, and I stepped out onto the almost deserted street. My feet made no noise, yet the dirty cap spun around. Sharp eyes watched me—a sharper chin shot out—then the feet moved and the man came toward me. I stopped dead.

"A hand-out, Governor?" he jerked through the side of his mouth. "The price of a bite and a flop." He slipped in front of me and struck a match—held it a moment before my face, then stuck it to the end of his cigarette and tossed it at my feet.

"Why do you look at me like that?" I gave ground—then thrust a coin into the dirty, outstretched hand.

"So's I'll know you again. I like to know my customers—them what is lib-

eral. And I'd know you again any place—yep, I could spot that map of yours again now, if it was in a court—even a criminal court."

I didn't get a chance to question him; he turned on his heel, shot out into the street and passed rapidly around a corner on the other side. His face was the face of a snow-bird; his words perhaps meaningless ones of a wandering mind. But I wanted to think that they were meaningless—yet I wondered.

The Ferret was dead. Murdered! Why? The Ferret was a snow-bird. Parsons was booming the drug traffic—Saunders was trying to swoop down on Parsons and the Ferret had been with Saunders. Was Saunders using him—had he used him for something besides getting me in line? And if Saunders was using the Ferret, had Parsons murdered him—or had him murdered? That Parsons did, I didn't know. But that Parsons would, I did know. I stepped into a drug store and called the number that Saunders had given me. Almost at once his gruff voice greeted me over the wire.

"Rhodes," I said, "Tracey Rhodes—can I talk freely?"

"From my end it is O. K." And his voice was low and refined now that he had my name and knew my voice.

"Was the Ferret in this with you—helping you in any way?" I kept a careful eye through the glass door—the store was practically deserted—the proprietor was busy in the rear, getting ready to close up for the night.

"That's not a fair question," Saunders answered. "Suppose the Ferret were to ask me about you, you wouldn't want me to—"

"I wouldn't mind if I was with the Ferret," I cut in grimly.

He knew before he asked the question—there was a break in his voice. But he asked it just the same.

"Has anything happened to the Ferret?"

"He's dead—murdered," I told him brutally.

"So—do you think he talked before he died?"

"Not likely—knowing the Ferret—unless he was snowed up. Don't know for sure—but heard he was."

"He wasn't." Saunders' voice rang with confidence. "I've had him in hand for some time—he wanted to help others—and—"

"Then he—the Ferret—knew about me—your plan?"

"No, he didn't—he might have guessed."

Might have guessed! I hung up the receiver with that ringing in my ears. The Ferret was working against Parsons, and the Ferret was dead. The man outside, who peered into my face—who was waiting and watching perhaps before the tenement! If Parsons knew about me—then what? I'd give Parsons a wide berth that night.

BUT I didn't. I thought of Molly and my promise to see her there, and I went straight back to Parsons—the hour was late for some people—the evening was just beginning for those who played the night clubs.

When I entered Parsons' I thought of the girl, Curly—and half looked at the table by the door, to see if she were still waiting. Silly—of course she wasn't there; probably left in a huff long ago. Curly was like a kid that way—nothing deep about Curly—nothing crooked either—she was too indolent for that. Still, I could see where she'd have a place in the pack. She'd make a first-class Pathfinder—and the work was easy and would fit in nicely with her babyish face and pouting lips. Even strangers tell a girl like that a whole lot—and it would be simple for her to form acquaintances in the dance hall and get close enough to the ladies to see if their diamonds were real, and perhaps find out if the gentlemen with them were their husbands. To hold up those who would give all they possess to silence the press, is an easy and a profitable occupation.

I looked for Molly—she was not in the room—a dozen tables only were occupied—a few acquaintances nodded to me over their glasses, but none came to greet me. That wasn't done in Parsons'—business before pleasure. Familiar faces—the four hundred of the underworld came there to dine and dance and study people. Victims were picked and chosen and later robbed, but while in Parsons' they were safe. There was no dip or cracksman eager or daring enough to ply his trade within those doors. Strangers who came guarded their valuables or watched their wives' jewelry, but they didn't need to—there were others to watch it for them. They were safer while in Parsons' than they were in their own churches.

I pulled up a chair and sat down at a vacant table, sipped the ginger ale which the waiter brought, and watched for Molly—but she did not come. A boy brought me a note. I read it guardedly. It was from Curly—she wanted to see me, above. Slowly I finished the ginger ale, paid my check, and passed into the hall. I'd see Curly, of course—why not? I was there to play the game—perhaps there would be much to learn from Curly. So I went above.

If Curly's black hair was long, her skirts were short—a chubby, angelic-looking bit of lace she was. The years had certainly dealt leniently with her. She had put on a bit of weight—that was all. I let her close the door behind me, lead me to the long couch, and sit down beside me.

"You've changed, Tracey," she said. "You weren't very gallant tonight. I liked you first, because you were so much the gentleman—but the gentleman I used to know wouldn't leave me like that—run off with another woman."

"Not 'another woman'—a duty to a friend—a man—the first to greet me after—after the years." I smiled—thought of the Ferret and Molly's words that Curly had given him "*something*"—and scowled.

"You don't love me any more." She

sort of snuggled up close and clutched at my hand. "You don't—do you, Tracey?"

"No—I don't think that I do." I told her the truth.

"But I still love you." And those soft brown eyes were turned up to me. "There's another woman, Tracey—there is, isn't there?" There was more than just that baby stare in her eyes now—there was a furtive, hard sort of look.

"Why, Curly." I laughed. "I've only been out a few hours—how could there be another?" Not that I minded lying to her. It wasn't that. It was of Molly I thought—why make an enemy for her? So I laid it on a little thicker—made it sound like the truth. "One was enough, Curly—more than enough. Don't you think so?" And a slight bitterness crept into my voice. We have our pride, I guess—I'm no different than other men. The wound was healed, but the scar was still there. "You forgot so quickly," I finished.

"I'm glad there's no one else; otherwise—I wouldn't tell you this—but—" She came to her feet now and stood before me. I saw her eyes search the room—mine followed—no curtains there—no place for anyone to hide and listen—just a tiny room—the single closed window and the door.

Curly bit her lip and spoke.

"I—something awful could happen to me for this—but you won't tell—Parsons—oh, I don't care, Tracey—I can't see you look at me like that—believe what you do. You went—and Parsons came to me—wanted me to work downstairs—just gather information. I thought of you and refused—I told him of my promise—that I'd wait—I wouldn't have the taint of the—You wanted me straight—and I was going to stick—I even had a job."

She dabbed at her eyes now, and leaning forward took me by the hands and pulled me to my feet.

"I want you to look down at me like you used to, Tracey—I want you to

know that I tell the truth—I want you to believe—to understand—and—and see what I did for you. It was Parsons—he came to me within a month after you were sent away. I refused to come here and work for him of course—but—but he made me—made me by threatening you."

"Me—" I looked straight into those big brown eyes.

"Yes, you," she answered. "You blew the safe at Van Suten's, didn't you—didn't you?"

"Maybe—yes." I gulped.

"You never told me that, did you?"

"No—no, I didn't."

"He said he'd turn you over to the police for that—there were other crimes too—he'd see that you went back again, and this time you'd do it all—life. Listen—it's the truth."

And certainly it rang like the truth. I never confided in Curly, yet she knew all—each plant that I had played with Parsons—she ran them over quickly.

"Oh—I can't forget them, any one of them—they're burnt into my mind. I thought your love would understand—and I waited for you to come out—waited and planned to pay Parsons back—and I can—I can. I know all about him—more than you think. He don't care for me now—he likes that blonde, Molly—and she's fallen for him hard. He's using her to pump you—figure out if you're going to play straight with him. You believe me, Tracey—you must believe me. I love you—I love you—I love you. Listen—" she fairly screamed the words, and I put out a hand to cover her mouth—but not before her voice rang through the room. "Parsons made me come here to save you."

VII

THE door opened and Al Parsons stood there. His face was livid but there was nothing to read in that. Feigned or real anger were the same to Parsons. His face registered as he

wished. He was a born actor—now I watched those narrow eyes—the cigar that he jerked from his lips and stuck into his pocket. A long arm stretched out and reached for the girl. I put an arm about her—drew her close to me. None of us spoke—the door swung there in the draught from the hall.

Parsons' hand dropped to his hip—slowly—cautiously for him—but then, he knew me—knew I was chain lightning. I didn't disappoint him there—there was no curtain for a hired murderer to slink behind. My gun was out—around Curly and on him, before he fairly reached his hip pocket.

"We'll talk with our mouths, eh?" Parsons' hands folded in front of him. He was a cautious man. "It wouldn't do to shoot here, Tracey—besides, you always told me you didn't go in for murder. Why the rod anyway? The skirt's been filling you up. Well, I'm not going to take her from you—you're welcome to her."

"I told him the truth," Curly cried, clinging to me and throwing her words over my shoulder at Parsons. "You made me come here—to save him. Oh, you'll lie and lie—but he knows. He believes me."

"Sh-h, Curly." I tried to quiet her—tried to break her grip from my neck. But that was impossible.

"Is this true—what she tells me, Parsons?" My voice was hard but steady—and the gun was steady too. Parsons was watching it.

He smacked his lips once before he spoke; wet them, too, with his tongue. He was thinking, was Parsons. Would he give her the lie or not? But her story was a good one—she had names and dates and things, that only Parsons and I knew about.

"It's true," he finally said. "She had a baby face and was paid well for it. You're not going to fight with me over a skirt, Tracey. I never was stuck on her—but business is business. You know me—know how I play the game—when I want a thing I get it. And

now—what about my coming in and finding the dame in your arms? If you thought she was my girl, what's the difference between your grabbing her from me and me from you? But you're welcome to her—I got better eyes."

"Yes—" Curly shot the words at him. "It's Molly O'Neil—if you can get her, and Tracey don't—I—" She buried her head on my shoulder.

The door clicked wide—Molly stood there facing us. Was there something of scorn in her eyes or of warning—or of both? But she smiled—a hard little smile—as she looked at Curly and me. What she was thinking wasn't hard to guess. It was what I was thinking. Less than an hour ago I had held her in my arms.

"Parsons's all right." She stepped over to him and linked an arm through his. "When I stick to a man I stick to the end—the very end."

And she stood close to Parsons but she spoke to me. He looked at her blankly—then he looked at me and at Curly—then he smiled at Molly. Certainly Parsons was surprised—there was no acting in that face. He had always liked Molly but she had despised him—and now—why, what had come over Molly? I opened my mouth to speak—threw back my head to escape the overpowering fragrance of Curly's hair—when Molly burst forth again.

"There's your friend, Al Parsons—Tracey Rhodes—he'd—why, Al, you're a fool, having him here with you. He's going to trap you—he's laying for you—working with a slick dick—calls himself Saunders and has been hanging out downstairs until a few days ago." And her hand shot out toward me. "Look, Al—can't you see it in his face—read the guilt there—look."

And Parsons looked blankly enough. What he saw in my face, I don't know—red certainly. So all Molly's talk had been a fraud, a cheat—acting—she was playing Parsons' game. Why? But how did she know about Saunders? Surely he hadn't told her anything—could she have

guessed the truth as closely as that? And I thought I knew—the Ferret had told her that he was in with Saunders. That was the reason for her friendship for the Ferret—her kindness to him—the pictures upon the wall. I looked at Molly again. It didn't seem possible—no—she could not have deliberately planned to betray me to Parsons. The thing had sprung up within her when she saw me with Curly—and Curly in my arms.

After all was this simply the uncontrollable wrath of jealousy? "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," came faintly back to me from those younger and better days.

Parsons was looking from Molly to me, and he was trying to quiet her. Was it possible he didn't believe her—reasoned the jealousy out too? Certainly he must have been suspicious, yet nothing of anger shone in his face.

"Forget it, Molly." He half shoved her toward the door. "Tracey wouldn't turn on me like that. But women play the devil with men—always have and always will. We'll settle this alone. Come!" he waved a hand at Curly, "both of you—get." And as Curly slipped from me and around Molly and through the door, Parsons laid down the law—the only law, as he knew it.

"One peep out of either of you—one messy dig or a wise crack, and out you go—out to stay out. Get me?"

Curly backed into the hall and disappeared. For a moment Molly held her ground.

"Get him out of here first, Parsons." She stamped a little foot as her blue eyes blazed. "You're a fool. I'm telling you gospel—if you don't run him out now I'll blow the game to the pack—I—"

"You'll what?" And Molly gave ground slightly as Parsons stepped toward her and grabbed her by the wrist. "One word about this matter—one peep outside this room—and—" He leaned forward and whispered in her ear. Her face went white, then red again.

"Maybe I can't prove it," she muttered, "but I know what I know."

Another word from Parsons and she was gone. He closed the door after her, spun the key in the lock, and turning faced me and the gun.

"Great gals!" He laughed mirthlessly. "We'll talk now, Tracey. You don't need to explain to me—you never were a 'stoolie' and you never will be. There's my hand."

He stretched his right hand toward me. Slightly dazed, I switched my gun to my left and gripped his—it was a hearty, steady hand that closed about mine.

"You see, Tracey—some of what Curly told you was true. But I needed her and I got her. She's got a baby face and baby ways; yet I had to jump down hard on her to get her to break her promise to you. It looks bad I'll admit, but thinking it over you'll see it was for your interest too. Curly wasn't built to work—you were full of high ideals about women—and me. I just kept her for you."

"This story about me—you believed that?"

And his laugh was easy, and the hand that fell upon my shoulder friendly.

"Not a word of it—Saunders wanted you to work in with him in a box deal—I know that—he's a cheap crook. I've watched him on the Avenue; I don't know how far you got with him—but let him slide. He's built for back porches and stealing milk bottles. And to show you, my boy, the faith I have in you, I'm going to let you in on something big. Get this—" the cigar jumped from his pocket and into his mouth—then his hand returned to his side again.

"I got a warehouse job—goods in it. Bootlegging paid and bringing it into the country was easy. The same officials who would throw up their hands at the drug traffic, winked at liquor. It takes trucks to move liquor and there's thousands in it, but to move narcotics it takes brains—and there's millions in it.

A case of gin puts fifty bucks in your pocket—but—"and his fingers came out and rested on my chest—"that same case and those same bottles filled with narcotics bring a fortune—besides, you only pay the same price for the official wink. Get it! I'm going to move a load—a whole load—right through the city, and I'm going to slip fifty thousand dollars in your hands for moving it. It's a cinch."

"Why—why me?"

"Because I need new blood for this. Oh, there's no way of connecting me up with it. You could go out and open up now, and prove nothing. But my men are known—suspected, I think. And that's bad. There's a cool million in this, Tracey—I'll double that fifty thousand. I got to have a man I can trust. It's my last big deal for a while—and I got to swing it myself. I can't take a chance on the boys any longer. The government agents have been after them. I can't let the thing lie—and I can't swing it alone."

"You're going into the thing yourself—going to actually help move it?" I gasped—certainly this wasn't Parsons' way.

He generally sat back and covered himself. Some who got caught had talked, but Parsons had his alibi and his political friends. More than once an honest and fearless district attorney had tried to bring him to justice—but his case always blew up at the last minute. Witnesses disappeared, even those who were closely guarded changed their stories when they reached the witness stand. Parsons' presence in court had terrifying effect on them. It wasn't simply psychological either—Parsons struck and struck quickly—men that betrayed him didn't live long on the Avenue. The thugs and crooks knew whence the retribution had come—law and order knew too—but Parsons was still a power in the city—a power that hadn't faded out with the passing of the old order of things and the red light district.

"What do you say, Tracey?" He studied my face. "I know you've got peculiar ideas. I won't hold you down to anything—swing this with me and I'll shove you one hundred grand—then you're free to go where you please, and take Curly with you. I won't stand in your way."

"I'll do it," I said.

Such a chance would never come again—here, at the very opening of my game against Parsons—a game which I thought would take many months, perhaps a year to produce the evidence necessary to convict him. And now the thing was really made. Just the single night, and Parsons caught red-handed.

Was Parsons trying to trap me? But no—I didn't think so. I watched his eye as I held his hand. He was playing a desperate game and thought that the stakes he offered would appeal to any man. Besides, he'd never send me out into the street with a story like that unless he trusted me—then again, what good would my story be? I had nothing to back it up. Enough people suspected Parsons—knew the truth about him, perhaps—but to prove that truth! I clenched my fingers as my hand dropped from his grip. This man's one passion was money—this time he had over-stepped himself. I'd get a word to Saunders, and—

"Tomorrow night." Parsons didn't seem to notice that I backed toward the door and though my gun was in my coat pocket my hand was also. "I trust you, Tracey—but I never trust anyone too much—you can drive that truck—only one will ride with you—Gaston. You see, it's simplicity that counts in crime. I'll see you safely out of the warehouse and if things go right meet you at the other end of the run. I don't dare leave it where it is a moment longer. But my men will be watching by the dock—men who think it's simply liquor. If it comes to guns it would take the National Guard to stop that truck before it swings out into the city."

"And the warehouse?" I tried to make my words indifferent.

"On the Hudson side," he told me in low voice. "Near Twenty-third street. I'll meet you across from the pier, near the alley of the house where Levy used to live—back in a bit maybe."

I nodded. I knew that place well—Levy was a shrewd little "fence." Shrewd, yes—yet he was doing twenty years at present. No one was more cautious or more clever than Levy—the memory of him drove home the truth that crime does not pay.

But I wanted time to think. I didn't like the whole thing. Could it be a trap—Al Parsons was a very clever man—none cleverer. Why did he trust me? After the way I had come to him—after the outburst of Molly—wouldn't he be sure first—look into the thing?"

"One thing more." Parsons' cold hand fell upon my wrist. "I trust you absolutely, Tracey. Did you ever hear of the Atlanta Protective Agency? Bright men—high-class detectives. And one of them saw you tonight, leaving the house of the Ferret—he even spoke to you, I think. Yet, I feel certain he is a man with a poor memory and could easily forget that little incident—if things go through well tomorrow night."

He didn't give me a chance to speak after that. He shoved me to the door, held it open while he got off his final instructions.

"Eleven o'clock tomorrow night. There will still be people on the street and I'm a man who doesn't like to be suspicious. We won't move the stuff till four, though—trucks in the city from midnight till two don't appear so well—unless they're known. Good night."

So I left him, back into the hall and slipped down the stairs. It would take some shadow to follow me. I don't think the dick has been born who can get my smoke in the great city. At least none attempted it that night. And there was plenty to think of as I changed taxis twice and finally climbed into the

subway on my roundabout route to see Saunders.

VIII

I DROPPED down the subway steps to the dreary damp dimness of the train level. Few people there—two men paced the almost empty platform, but they were there before I arrived, and no other passengers came before a train roared into the station. The wheels creaked out their message like a distant voice.

"Is it a trap—is it a trap—is it a trap?" the wheels said over and over and over, and then they stopped.

I stepped into the lighted car—and with that light came a new one. Parsons was not trying to trap me—he needed me. He played a careful game. If the one hundred thousand dollars for the job was not enough to keep me in line, there was the other threat—the Atlanta Protective Agency operator who had seen me coming from the house in which the Ferret lay dead—murdered. Parsons had probably covered the tracks of that murderer well—the police would need a victim—I was a jail-bird—it wouldn't be hard to anchor the crime on me. No, I didn't think Parsons wanted to trap me. That he feared me and wished to get rid of me didn't ring true. If that were the case I'd have been arrested by now, and charged with the murder of the Ferret.

Yet, the ways of Al Parsons were hard to understand. From my point of view it looked easy to trap him. What was in the back of Parsons' mind? Did he simply scout Molly's talk—did he take it as nothing but jealousy? Did he—and then came more thoughts.

One hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money. Enough to tempt a man who had been honest all his life. But it didn't tempt me. Perhaps it might, if things were different. Molly stood in the way though. If association with Parsons could so change her! It was a blow, that. I had known Molly as a

child and knew that my life would be safe in her hands. I couldn't believe that she deliberately started out to trap me into some admission that I was working for the downfall of Parsons. There was love in her face, her straight moist blue eyes—in the very touch of her fingers when I held her in my arms in that dark hallway. No—it was all the sudden rage of a woman who felt that she had been scorned. But I'd talk it over with Saunders. Still, there was no sense of a trap.

THE little Jap opened the door for me at the brownstone front in the Eighties. He didn't show any surprise at seeing me—simply tightened the cord of his gaily colored robe and left me in the library. A minute or two later he returned, and I was asked to go above.

Joe Saunders sat up in bed and his first words of greeting were words of caution.

"You weren't followed?" he said.

"No—certain." Then I started in and laid the whole thing before him.

He watched my face while I spoke. But he didn't speak until I finished.

"What do you think?" he finally questioned.

"I don't know what to think. You want this man—I want you to get him. Suppose it's straight and the thing goes through, and I'm not there and—"

"But you must be there." He nodded. "And I must be there too. You can't understand why he wishes to trap you. Did you ever think that perhaps he wishes to trap me—and must do that through you?"

"Then he believed the girl's story—Molly's?"

"I don't know—certainly he has suspected me for some time, but to what extent I don't know. And Molly made a remarkable guess for one who hasn't been very close to Parsons. He likes that girl—wants her, and she's given him the cold stare. Funny she fell for him all at once—or has she been stringing him along for her own purpose?

Still," he leaned far forward in the bed, "we've got to go through with it on the chance that it's on the level. I'll be watching that alleyway. Are you afraid?" he asked, as I shook my head doubtfully.

"No." I thought of Molly when I answered. Certainly I told myself that she wasn't worth my thought—that I should despise her—but I knew differently. I loved her. Curly had been a woman, but Molly was *the* woman. Stupid! Wrong thinking! Sheer madness! I'll admit to all that—but the truth stood out just the same. I loved her.

"It may mean death." Saunders was watching me closely.

"That is true." I nodded. "And my reason for being careful. As a dead man I wouldn't stand much of a show of straightening out the wrongs of society. I can't understand Molly."

Saunders climbed from the bed and stepped to a little dresser—moved it slightly, disclosing a wall safe. Reaching in, he pulled out a sheet of paper, and folding it so that but one name stood out among a long list, held it toward me.

"This is my list of wanted people—look."

The single name that I saw was that of Molly O'Neil.

"Satisfied?" He folded up the paper and put it back in the safe and started to close it.

"Stop." I took him by the shoulder. "She's—she's been in this dope smuggling? The Ferret told me that she worked alone."

"Molly O'Neil is wanted for many things, I believe. I think I could convict her for the smuggling of narcotics. Never has she had an actual hand in it—but—she's been in the vicinity of most every suspected attempt. Until tonight I couldn't fully understand; never could link her up as being close to Parsons—but what you have told me makes me think that perhaps I have not been as clever as I thought."

"I want that name off your list." My words were more a spoken thought—but he heard and swung around.

"Yes—why?" Those gray eyes were very piercing.

"Until it is off I won't move another step in this—this thing. If it don't come off I'm through." I cleared my throat twice but my voice seemed very husky.

"Yes—why?" he said again.

"I want it off—I don't know why."

"But I think I do."

He spread out the long single sheet with its row of names typed in double space, and with the nail file on the dresser cut a bit from the paper and handed it to me.

"There—satisfied? Somehow, I didn't think that the name belonged there. To know the girl makes one doubt, but to watch the girl makes one reason." And he didn't explain that—but I was looking down at the single typed name in my hand—then I tore it into tiny bits and placed it in my pocket.

"Now—" he suddenly went on as he thrust the paper away, spun the little dial upon the steel door, and shoved the dresser back into place, "now—about this trap—for surely I believe that Parsons wishes to rid himself of me, and you too, for good and all. But there are traps and traps, and surely he gives us credit for suspecting him."

"Yes—but perhaps he figures a hundred grand is enough to make me forget my pact with you—if he believes we have a pact."

"Certainly—but again, why are you in it at all? You came to him with suspicion in your heart and a threat on your tongue—he let you be railroaded three years ago—he admitted, when he had to, that he used threats against you to entice this girl, Curly, into his pack. And, my dear Mr. Rhodes, it strikes me that Al Parsons could very nicely move a truckful of drugs while you stood in a darkened alleyway and I watched from the warehouse across the street. He might even take you, and lead me, into a warehouse where the business was

legitimate and his interest in it honorable. Under those circumstances I—"

Saunders broke off suddenly—the bell of the telephone by his bed rang sharply. He sat upon the edge of the bed—lifted the receiver. His "hello" was very faint and with a yawn in it.

"Yes—" I heard him say, his voice suddenly fully awake. "Yes—certainly—as you wish." Then he turned to me.

"Tracey Rhodes," he said, "a lady would like to speak to you."

"A lady—Molly!" I gasped.

"I think not," Saunders said as I lifted the receiver.

"Tracey—this is Curly." A hurried, frantic voice came over the wire. "I want to see you—must see you—now—at once. It's Parsons—the brute—he—he beat me—and I'll tell you all—he's going to trap you. I don't care what you think of me—what—I—still love you and even if you despise me I want to have you. Now—at once."

"Just a minute, Curly." I placed a hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Saunders. "It's the other girl—Curly," I told him. "She wants to see me—will I have her come here?"

"By all means—if she'll come."

And she would—any place. I didn't know if she caught my caution—not to let herself be followed or suspected. But I thought that she did. Curly was also a product of the night—fear or horror, or just instinct, would warn her and make her careful.

"Now what?" I turned to Saunders. "What do you think now?"

"Now," he said, "we postpone thinking until we see the girl. The plot thickens. A woman scorned might have been your downfall—another woman scorned may save everything. This Curly, I believe, will talk—and we will listen. In the meantime if you will wait below I will slip into some clothes. Even in the excitement and thrill of the hunt one must observe the conventions. Perhaps she will prefer to talk to you alone."

It was in the library fifteen minutes

later that I met Curly. She ran directly to me and threw her arms about my neck. I saw the swollen cheek and the slight discoloration already forming beneath her left eye. She didn't seem to notice that I pushed her away—or if she did she was too infuriated to mind it.

"He struck me—he struck me," she cried over and over.

Funny the reactions we have. Three years ago, Curly coming to me like that would have meant a search for Parsons and perhaps death. Now—I felt for her of course, but as a man might feel for any woman.

"Parsons' going to do you in," she hurried on. "He not only suspects that you work with Saunders—but knows the truth. Molly talked to him again after you left. But he only smiled at her and thanked her—her!" and little hands clenched. "He was sorry she spoke before you—thought that she might drive you from his power when you knew that he suspected. And he wants to trap this detective—this Saunders. I knew that—tomorrow night he will lead you to a different warehouse—allow this Saunders to follow, and there get the two of you. I want you to get him—get him good—make him pay—kill him—anything. I hate him." Her teeth set grimly.

"Do you mind, Curly, if another hears this—Saunders?"

"No—no, I don't. But I can't be here long. He doesn't suspect me—thinks I'll crawl back to him—and I will—this once—to see him—see him."

But I was calling up the stairs to Saunders. Curly could help us. For ten minutes Saunders and I listened to her story, that came in quick sharp jerks.

"Will Parsons know how many follow him and Tracey, if I put others on the job with me?" Saunders questioned.

"Yes." She nodded. "I think perhaps you'd better arrest him at once."

Saunders shook his head.

"Would it be possible for Tracey and me to handle this alone? How many

men will there be with Parsons—do you know?"

"Just him and Gaston—Tracey will be led to this old warehouse—he and Parsons will pass in through the window. When you attempt to follow, Gaston will strike from the shadows by the window. This is murder—a personal murder—and Parsons isn't going to have too many in it. If you could enter by another way—or get Gaston first—"

"Forewarned is forearmed." Saunders stroked his chin. "But suppose we succeed in capturing Parsons—what then—what will we find in this warehouse—is it empty?"

"And that's his weak point—I heard him discuss it with Gaston. The place is full of drugs—there isn't another place he could take you. He knows that you have discovered his former places and that men are watching him."

"Where is this place?" Saunders never took his eyes from her.

"Over by the East River—I don't know for sure—Parsons is very cautious. I can only warn you—from then on you must take your own chances—my advice is not to go, but arrest him now—I can tell a lot—will tell a lot."

But when Saunders questioned Curly it appeared that her information could not be backed up. Some of it was knowledge, some suspicion—and all seemed to be born of hatred. Saunders looked at me. I nodded. Ten minutes later we let Curly out. She would have liked to have been alone with me, I think—her hand clung to mine a long time. Then she was gone—hurrying along the deserted street. Saunders and I faced each other.

For a long time Saunders paced the room.

"We'll have to play it alone," he said at length. "And there is but one plan. We must attack first. Since I am expected to follow, my part will be easy. We won't give them a chance—as soon as you are alone by the warehouse with Parsons, draw on him. We'll get Gaston—handcuff the two, and search the

warehouse. If we find the stuff, well and good—if not, it is another failure. However, I think the stuff will be there. The girl's story rings true—Parsons knows that I have drawn very close to him—he is desperate."

We talked for an hour after that, but our plans were simple enough. I was to meet Parsons—Saunders was to be watching and would follow us. Two against two, and all of us would be heavily armed. But we would strike first. So I left him—sought my little hotel and slept well into the next day.

IX

THE clock in the tower of a distant church was striking eleven when I slipped into the alley near Twenty-third Street. A voice greeted me almost at once.

"Good." Parsons stepped from the shadows. "Let us start. It has been necessary to change our plans—also, Tracey, I wasn't sure you'd show up. Prison plays the devil with a man's nerves—so I didn't tell you the truth about the stuff. It's on the East side—East River."

We walked across town. A light rain was falling and the side street that Parsons sought was almost deserted.

"We'll take a taxi," he said suddenly, as one drew up to the curb in the middle of the block.

I wondered about Saunders—would he be ready for such a move? It was unexpected. Curly said that we were to walk. It was too late to quit now without giving the whole thing away. But I turned and looked down the block before I climbed in. Another taxi was coming slowly up the street—a man on the sidewalk was stepping toward the curb. Good—Saunders was on the job. I breathed easier as I climbed into the cab, felt the closeness of Parsons behind me—and the door slammed as I dropped to the seat—dropped to the seat and came erect with a start. A man was there ahead of me—a man whose gun pounded against my chest.

"We won't have any excitement." Parsons' voice came suavely from behind me. "It isn't my intention to cart a dead man across the city, but I am always willing to change my plans to meet conditions. There—that's better." He had jerked my hands behind me and I felt the cold steel and heard the click as the handcuffs locked.

I didn't speak—there was nothing for me to say. Why, the trap was sprung with a simplicity that was astounding. And what had made him change his plans—and what of Saunders? In the dim light of a passing street light I recognized the man in the cab. It was Gaston.

Parsons was talking.

"You're like a little child—and the welt on Curly's head served its purpose. She's a fine girl, Tracey—you should have stuck to her. Yet—there is Molly too—I seem to have a certain charm with women."

"Saunders—" I gasped. "did he fall like—was he trapped?"

"Ah—not yet." Parsons laughed. "He wouldn't be one to enter strange taxi cabs—not him—he brought his own—but we'll all meet by the East River—a jolly little party."

"Curly did this," I stammered.

"All arranged. The Ferret talked before he died. But he died hard, and it took considerable persuasion, I hear. Molly—in her affection for me—nearly gave the whole show away, Tracey—when she burst into the room like that. Curly needed to regain your confidence, so she pretended that she had come in with me to save you. The welt on the cheek was an artistic piece of work and a surprise to Curly, I assure you. But a promised trip to Europe reconciled her." I could feel his broad shoulders shrug. "She would have had that anyway. She'd be jealous of Molly. Molly—I won't flatter myself too much, for I really believe that Curly's affectionate caress of you helped me in that direction. Curly and I planned it all. Molly's

entrance was accidental and nearly spoiled everything."

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked him.

"What do you think?" And a hardness crept into his voice as his hand quickly frisked me and jerked my gun from my pocket. "Those who double-cross Al Parsons pay with their lives. You are no exception to my rule. But this government man—this Saunders, who works alone—I wanted to—"

"Government man!" I gasped.

"Yes—he's Rollins, of the Secret Service—it took me nearly two years to find that out. He worked so quietly and always alone, posing as a gambler and a crook."

I nodded, but said nothing. Saunders had not told me that. I had thought—But we were pulling up on a deserted street now—there were the docks down the block, and the faint lights of boats through the fog that enveloped the East River.

"We'll walk a pace. Out you get. And a word or a shout means—" The gun jabbed into my back.

Gaston stayed in the cab as I climbed to the street beside Parsons. For a moment we stood there after our taxi drove away. Far down the street were the lights of another car that had stopped—that would be Saunders. Parsons gave him a chance to see us and then we passed around a corner, walked slowly to a little alley beside a dark and dismal building and stepped inside.

"Straight ahead." A gun was still shoved into my back. "All right, boys," Parsons called softly, and four shadows merged with the blackness of the alley. Certainly Parsons was taking no chances.

Far down the alley we turned and passed through an old door which swung closed on a weight. But before that door closed I heard shots—two of them in quick succession—and the scraping of heavy feet on the wet pavement. Hope, then—Saunders was not taken so easily.

Parsons cursed softly—but the gun never wavered. I looked around the room that was lighted by a single lantern hanging from a beam. Gaston came toward me. Parsons called to him—then dashed out the door.

Five minutes passed, I guess. Parsons returned.

"Hogan got his." He shot the words through his teeth. "And here's the man that done it."

His mouth bleeding, a deep gash over his forehead, and his coat torn from his back, Joe Saunders was shoved into the room. We were both in the same fix, yet I envied him a bit. He had gone down fighting—and one man dead.

"Did anyone hear them shots?" Gaston gasped. "The taxi is it still there?"

"I don't know," Parsons answered. "Pete's gone to look—we can't do anything but wait—I guess it's all right."

It was ten minutes before the man called Pete returned. And his message was reassuring to Parsons and his pack. At least, the first part of it—it was quite evident that no one had heard shots, or if they had, they had ignored them or took them for the backfire of an automobile. The second part of the message brought a curse—and then a laugh from Parsons. I didn't hear what Pete said but I heard Parson's answer.

"Molly, eh? What the devil—I told her to stay up the street in the big car—she must have heard the shots—eh, Pete?" Parsons turned to me. Queer thing, Molly—she wants to see you dead—and then—well, Curly goes to Europe." And his thick lips slipped back, baring his teeth like the fangs of an animal.

At an order from Parsons the man called Pete passed from the room—Gaston and Parsons remained. Parsons turned to Saunders.

"A Secret Service paradise," Parsons laughed. "At least, it was—while you're here with me, the truck goes out the back street—in the meantime—we will dicker for your life. Come—what can you tell me? How much do you know?"

How many of my men can you convict? Have you worked entirely alone or are other government agents in with you? Come, man, speak up—I'm not one to waste time."

"I have nothing to say—nothing but a warning, Parsons. If you murder me you'll pay for it. I've got enough evidence to hang you."

This was bluff—and I knew it. So did Parsons, I think.

"Better men than you have talked to me, Saunders—or Rollins—or whatever your real name is. The doors of this room are lined with steel—there is no window but that one behind Tracey, which is simply an air shaft leading to another part of the building. I want information. I'll know whether or not to believe it. But talk, you will—or I'll shoot you to ribbons."

His gun came up—trained on Saunders. He didn't speak again—didn't wait for Saunders to speak. He pressed the trigger—a bit of flame and a sharp report. I saw Saunders sag slightly and try to raise his handcuffed hands to his right shoulder.

I stepped back with a groan. The sting was there as if that bullet had pierced my own shoulder. My hands touched glass—I felt of the window behind me—clutched at it—tried to raise it—succeeded a little. There was nothing special in my mind. Parsons was going to kill us. Anything was better than waiting there and perhaps watching Saunders die—die slowly. I might open the window, crash through the space and dash to safety—bring help to Saunders. More likely I'd get a bullet in my back—but I didn't care. Death was better that way. What if it was one chance in a thousand—I'd— And the window stuck. I couldn't push it any higher.

"Now will you talk?" Parsons spoke again—and again his gun came up.

I could see the deadly light of the killer in his eyes. There isn't any way to explain it—you just know when you've lived close to death.

Saunders bit his bleeding lip but he did not speak. I could see the little pool of red beginning to form through his white shirt near his shoulder. Gaston leaned against the door, smoking a cigarette. Again Parsons' gun straightened—his finger tightened. There would be another report and another red stain upon that white shirt. Fascinated, I watched—unable to interfere—unable to—

X

WARM flesh touched my hands behind me. Then something cold crept into my palm. Impossible—yet it was true. Cold metal—my handcuffed right hand clutched a gun. Someone had shoved it through the window. I didn't stop to think—didn't care then. I swung quickly sideways, facing Parsons—the gun stuck out in my cuffed right hand. Not a good shot with my hands so manacled, behind my back—not a bad one either—scarcely ten feet separated us.

"Drop that gun, Parsons." I cried wildly. "And not a move out of you, Gaston," I added in the one breath.

Parsons turned sharply—Gaston's hand shot toward his pocket—and things began to happen. Parsons fired and missed—but I didn't. I saw him stagger across the room, clutching at his arm—saw him switch the gun from his right to his left hand as I fired again. This time I did better—Parsons crumpled up, sank slowly to one knee, rested so a moment—then pitched forward on his face. I gave my attention to Gaston now—why hadn't he fired? He couldn't—wounded Saunders had rushed forward—was buffetting his large body against that of the smaller man.

I dashed across the room with the gun held awkwardly behind me, but couldn't get a shot at the smaller figure of Gaston, mostly hidden behind the bulk of Saunders. Gaston's gun came up—there was a sharp report—the streak of orange blue flame. Throwing

all hope of firing aside I lurched forward—my head low—striking the outstretched gun in Gaston's hand as Saunders staggered back before that shot.

Gaston's gun fell to the floor, his body twisted quickly and I thudded against the wall. Shouts of men now—pounding on the door without. I turned sharply—Gaston was by the door—had flung it open before I reached him. Hopeless—these thugs would be on us now—yet my attack had not been in vain—Al Parsons was stretched there upon the floor.

The door burst open—Gaston was hurled back into the room. His shriek of fear echoed loudly. The police had come—many of them—half a dozen men were crowding into the room with drawn revolvers. Gaston was jerked to his feet—a huge blue-coated figure had reached out a hand and grasped me by the shoulder.

"Tracey Rhodes—and just out too—I—"

Saunders was speaking—talking hurriedly and faintly to a squat little plain clothes man who was bracing him there by the wall, easing him down to a sitting posture upon the floor. I couldn't hear what Saunders said, but the little man did—for his command rang through the room. A husky bluecoat turned over the body of Al Parsons and took the keys to the handcuffs from his pocket. Another ran from the room, issuing orders, Saunders' voice came loud and clear.

"Get them—all of them—the truck—left the warehouse—street behind—and Parsons?"

"Dead all right—through the neck," someone said.

A snap! The handcuffs were off and I was free. I rushed to Saunders but he waved me aside.

"Don't bother about me, Tracey—you know the ropes—get the others." Saunders coughed. "Pretty shooting you did—though how you concealed that gun is beyond me and—"

I didn't wait to hear more—I thought

of that gun. How did I get it—who gave it to me? Had Curly after all not betrayed me? But I ran to the little window—forced it up as high as I could. There were nails holding it, that I wrenched out—then sticking my head through the opening I glared down into the black damp shaft. Not very deep certainly—but nothing was there. Or was there? Surely something was slumped beneath the window—a white little figure.

Throwing a leg quickly over the sill I dropped the three or four feet to the hard bottom of the shaft. A figure was there all right. I lighted a match—a tiny flicker that died a moment—then burst into flame. A white face—closed eyes and soft yellow hair. The next moment the match went out and I was kneeling by that still body.

Dead? No—the breathing was loud enough—queer little gasps.

"Molly," I called softly, "after all, you—you did—did think of me and couldn't see—" My voice broke—I lifted her head—placed my arm about her shoulder.

Her eyes opened, I think—just the feel of them in the blackness. I couldn't see her now—nothing but the dim whiteness of her blurred face there in the pit. But her arms came up—slowly they sought my shoulders, rested there a moment—then crept around my neck.

"Tracey, Tracey," she murmured over and over, "take me away—away from it. When the moment came—I couldn't do it—couldn't press the trigger—and your body so close—and Parsons going to kill you. You—I'm a weakling—forgive me."

"I forgive you, Molly—everything." I pressed that throbbing little chest close to me. "I love you, Molly."

"You understand now—but you didn't understand then." And seeming to sense that I was still at sea she went on rapidly in sharp jerks. "There—when I pointed you out to Parsons. I heard him and Curly plan your death—you had a gun then—I thought you'd get

away, so I denounced you to Parsons—fearing that he might kill you before I had a chance to tell you alone. And—and I wanted to drive you from the Avenue for good—make you go away. He knew you were close to Saunders—knew that Saunders was a government man all along—and the Ferret—”

“Yet, yes—I know, Molly.” I didn’t care what she had to tell me. I just wanted to hold her there in my arms and know that she—she loved me.

She went on despite my protests.

“I thought Parsons suspected that I had listened to him and Curly plan your death, and that he never would let me get a moment alone with you. So, by accusing you I tried to break up the whole thing—at least, put you on your guard. It broke my heart when you didn’t understand and looked at me like that. I played Parsons for a fool—he believed I hated him—it was I who notified the police—but I wasn’t sure of the place—until that shot. But they came—in time—in time. Oh, Tracey, he never let me out of his sight until I sat there alone in his big car, and a man was watching me then—but the man left when the shots came, so I followed you.”

She began to sob and her arms tightened around my neck.

“Parsons—Parsons,” she cried.

“He’s dead,” I told her. “He won’t bother you any more, Molly—and if you want to go away now—you and I—you—you—do care?”

“I do—I do. I love you. But I’m just a weak woman. I couldn’t shoot—not even when it meant your life. And Parsons was there with the gun. Things

were blurred—I slipped the gun into your hand—there were shots—then blackness—till you found me here and—Tracey!”

This time our lips met and neither of us spoke.

A sharp stab of light piercing the darkness found us—a muffled chuckle sent our eyes up to the window—bewildered, blinded in the sudden light. In the darkness of that pit we had found the way. Neither of us had spoken then—but we knew.

Saunders had to hear the story of Molly and the gun all over again. A police sergeant had dressed his wounds, which proved but flesh ones. But he wouldn’t leave the warehouse until it had been searched from top to bottom.

“There’s enough evidence to put Parsons away for life—but that isn’t necessary now, Tracey—you stopped his activities and are entitled to the money from our esteemed citizens who believed me a private, and not altogether honest detective. But they helped me—for some of them have not a very clean record. They told me things that they never would have told if they had known I was a government agent.” He stretched out a hand and placed it on my wrist—it was a very cold hand and his face was very white. “I might be using a man like you in the government—if—when you come back from your honeymoon. I—”

A man burst in the room.

“They just nailed the truck—backed onto a barge less than five blocks away,” he shouted.

What Saunders answered I did not hear.

You will find an announcement of unusual interest on page 65.

BUZZARD BAIT



By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

MY reputation damned me. I was Black Barr, the killer, supposed to reach for his gun at the first sign of trouble, and expecting that I would draw, the Mexican had tried to beat me to it. It was my life or his.

I was in a black mood as I paced the sidewalk, cursing my reputation, cursing my very skill with the heavy six-guns of the West. After that last affair, I had come to Phoenix where I fancied myself unknown. I had decided to take an assumed name, start life anew, masquerade as the ordinary, peace-loving, jovial cowpuncher. I had taken the black, angora chaps, the black Stetson hat, the black silk shirt and my black neckerchief with which it had once pleased me to adorn myself; packed them in a trunk, and checked that trunk in storage. Henceforth I would not be Black Barr. I would adopt some other name.

The blaring of an automobile horn interrupted my meditations. Again and again it sounded, close by, particularly loud. I looked up with a scowl. There was a girl at the wheel of a car that

was covered with the white dust of the desert, yet which had evidently recently been a car of the cities, one of the polished, purring creatures of the boulevards. As I looked at her, she bowed and beckoned.

Hastily I looked over my shoulder, thinking that there was some person behind me to whom she spoke, but there was no one. Once more I lifted my eyes to the machine, and once more she beckoned and smiled.

Hat in hand I approached the car. She was not a tourist; of that I was certain. There was a tan upon her face, a tan which was not the deep burn of one who is careless of personal appearance, but the deep olive tint of one who is a lady, yet much in the open. Her clothes were serviceable whipcords cut with a certain masculine appearance, and yet feminine. Her lips were deep, full, red, parted in a cordial smile over white teeth, but the smile went no further than her lips. Her eyes were tired, almost listless; but there was a certain calm power in the clear, hazel depths of those eyes despite their weariness.

"You wished to speak with me?"

"You are a cowpuncher?"

I bowed slightly.

"Yes, ma'am."

She studied me curiously, aware of the reserve of my manner; aware, perhaps, of the education which would crop out in my diction now and again. A college degree leaves its imprint regardless of subsequent environments.

"I have work for cowpunchers. I wish to take three back with me. Perhaps if you are out of work. . . .?"

She paused expectantly.

I asked her a question.

"What made you think I was a cowpuncher?"

She laughed lightly at that, a tired little laugh.

"Oh, you men! Here you are walking up and down the sidewalk, bronzed until you resemble an Indian, bow-legged and toeing in, with your trousers covering boots with high heels, and then you ask me how I know you are a puncher."

"And where is this work you mention, ma'am?"

She stiffened. Into her eyes there came a look of reserve as though she had drawn a veil over thoughts.

"On the north side of the Gila Mesa."

She spoke and then stopped, watching me, tense, expectant. I did not mean to be rude, but there was much that was unusual in this conversation, and I meant to know one more thing.

"Why do you come to Phoenix to hire cowpunchers for the Gila Mesa? There are many places between there and here where men may be obtained."

Her reply came glibly, as though she had rehearsed a speech.

"I prefer to hire my men in the larger cities. They have had their fling and are ready to return for a period of work. Where my ranch is situated, I cannot get men readily; and when I take men from the smaller towns, they do not stay. They want

to draw their pay and head into the cities on a spree."

I looked at the dust covered automobile, looked up in her tired eyes, and made a decision.

"I will go," I said.

She took a leather-covered book from a side pocket of the car.

"The name, please?"

It was my turn to hesitate.

"You may call me Mr. . . . Black, and enter me, on the payroll as B. Black."

She had regarded me contemplatively as I had hesitated and then taken a name which has been associated with my past. Black Barr would fade from the picture, but the adjective which had described him for so many years on the border country would become my name.

"Very well, Mr. Black. Can you meet me here in an hour with blankets all ready? I would like to leave by noon."

I nodded, stepped back and raised my hat.

"I will be here in an hour."

Her trim foot pressed on the starter, the huge car purred away, and she flashed me one more bright smile, a smile this time in which her tired eyes joined. I watched her go, then turned and went back to my hotel.

Carefully I went over my things, taking those I felt I would need, and preparing to store those I would have no use for. When it came to my black outfit, I found that I couldn't bear to leave it behind. I made up my mind I wouldn't wear it, but would put it into my war bag. I wear chaps of plain leather, a cheap, blue shirt and common red neckerchief, but I would have my other things with me as part of a memento, as a reminder of The Black Barr who would ride no more.

I rolled up my bed roll and war bag, secured a taxi, and drove to the point opposite the park where I had met the girl and whose name, it had occurred to me, I did not know.

It lacked ten minutes of the hour when I arrived, and there were two other men there before me. I sized them up from the corner of my eye, and formed an instant distaste for them.

One was a man with thick, flabby lips and leering eyes, a man with great puffs over his face giving a swollen appearance to his features, a man who drank much, a floater, drifter. No great amount of his time was spent in the open. He looked upon a job as merely a means to obtain money for sprees. I knew the type.

The other was one of those shifty individuals who are not to be trusted in any race; particularly when they have Mexican blood in them they are to be watched. He was lean, sinewy, sallow, and in his eyes there was a trace of reddish color, a red which mingled with a dark brown. His fingers were long, thin and sensitive and constantly rolling cigarettes, or conveying the paper cylinders to and from his thin lips. His nostrils were dark and wide, and dilated as the blue smoke came from them in two great streams.

They surmised that I was there on the same errand as themselves, and would have spoken, but I kept at a distance, throwing up a wall of cold reserve about myself. I knew their conversational abilities. The shorter one with the thick lips would talk of women and booze. The thin one would listen with quivering nostrils, adding a cunning word here and there.

Promptly on time the car slid through traffic and drew up at the curb. In the rear was a great trunk, a trunk which had evidently been added to the car when it had been turned from a boulevard sedan into a desert traveler. Upon one of the running boards was a new rack for holding baggage.

The girl slid from behind the wheel and took charge of the situation with a firm hand.

"You two men, put your rolls there on the side of the car in the running-board rack. Mr. Black, will you put

yours in the trunk in the rear? I wish you to sit in front with me. The other two may sit in the rear."

The men picked up their blankets and placed them in the running-board rack and climbed heavily into the sedan. I put my roll into the trunk, and noticed that there was another roll already there. Then I climbed in beside the girl.

"Apparently you people haven't gotten acquainted. You'd better, if you're going to work with each other for the next few months. Mr. Black, this is Mr. Dick Graves and Pedro Murietta."

The shorter one with the leering eyes, Dick Graves, twisted his flabby lips and licked them with his tongue.

"Here's how," he said, and abstracted a flask from his pocket, tilting it up and draining it of the last drop. "I'd offered it around only there was just the one drink left."

Pedro Murietta bowed with a sudden reserve which matched my own, and said nothing. Apparently he was sensitive, this Murietta, and he would be as distant as I was. That suited me, and I turned and settled back in the seat.

"I haven't your name," I said to the girl, "nor the name of the ranch for which I will be working."

She hesitated, acting as though she were on the point of withholding the information, then suddenly smiled as she slipped the car into gear and began to glide through the city.

"I am Miss Jean Page, and you will be working for the Diamond M."

With that she stepped on the throttle until the needle of the speedometer swung up far beyond the legal limit, and concentrated her attention upon the strip of paved road which wound out into the desert. It was as though she discouraged further conversation or comment on the situation, and I settled back in silence. I could find out things by waiting as well as by talking.

In the rear seat I could hear the low tones of the two men as they made

an occasional comment; could hear the rumble of the smaller man's voice as he told some story for the telling of which he deemed it expedient to lower his voice; could hear his burst of laughter at the end of it, and turned to catch the thin lips of Pedro Muri-etta twisted into a smile.

The girl deigned not to notice, but hurtled the heavy car through the afternoon sunlight, driving as though the very devil were on her trail.

For three hours she traveled as fast as the car could be safely driven, skidding through the dust of the turns, taking the straightaways with a quick acceleration, straddling the bad places in the road. While the pavement had lasted she had held the needle at fifty to fifty-five miles per hour. On the dirt roads she handled the car like an expert. At length she turned to me and asked me if I could take the wheel and drive for a while. I nodded, shifted places with her without a word, and began to crowd on the gas. I knew the car, knew how to drive desert roads, and if she wanted speed I made up my mind I would show her speed until she begged me to slow down. Faster and faster I went, and, at length, having heard nothing from her, I managed to get a breathing spell on a smooth stretch and steal a glance at her. She was smiling, a mere upturning of the corners of the mouth, coupled with a twinkle of the tired eyes. I knew then that she would never ask me to slow down, regardless of what might happen, and then I turned my attention to the wheel, glowing with a friendly feeling toward the girl. After all, she was carrying her own troubles on her own slight shoulders.

At dark we came to a small city, one of those desert places where a general store and garage furnish the entire business district. There was a little cafe in which a greasy Mexican leaned his huge girth against a lunch counter and regarded us with a smirk. I had stopped for gasoline, oil and water at

the suggestion of the girl, and while the attendant was filling the car she spoke to us crisply, impersonally.

"We eat here," she said.

Half an hour later we were well on our way, plugging through the night. Our meal had been consumed in silence, and in silence we had resumed our journey. Now the road was winding up long, dry canyons, narrowing down to a single track affair as it cut through projecting spurs, dipping down into rocky gulches, climbing steep pitches. It was a strange section of the country to me, but I could tell that we were climbing, climbing rapidly.

By midnight we came to the top of a long grade up which we had been forced to crawl in low gear. Before us there loomed a great plateau. The dark shapes of pines bristled against the star-filled sky.

"The Gila Mesa," said the girl with a wave of her hand. "We'll camp here."

I turned off the road and slowed the car to a stop.

"We can't be so very far from the ranch?" I said, half questioning, half suggesting.

"We will camp here," she repeated.

Without another word I opened the door, went to the rear and threw my blanket roll on the ground, tugged at the single knot, stretched out the canvas, and took off my shoes. The other two men were getting their blankets from the running board. The girl came and stood near me, watching in silence for a moment, then she walked back to the front of the car. Suddenly I heard the whirr of the starter, the throb of the motor, the clash of gears and the automobile shot forward and whined away in the darkness, the tail light gleaming redly as it jolted down the road.

The car disappeared and the sound of its motor died away. Silence descended upon the plateau; a silence which seemed to be as heavy as the darkness. Up at that elevation there

was a sharp tang to the air, and the stars gleamed in unwinking splendor.

Dick Graves stood over his bed roll, mouth open.

"Well, for the love o' Pete!" he ejaculated. "Darned if I don't believe the jane's puttin' about five miles between us an' where she sleeps! Ha! Ha! Ha! We're a tough lookin' bunch all right! She knows when she's well off. What'd yuh say to her, Black?"

The inquiry was addressed to me, and he paused awaiting a reply.

"Come on, man, what'd yuh say to her?"

I rolled into my blankets.

"The same thing I say to you—Good-night," I told him, and then drew the covers over me.

Pedro Murietta laughed, a cruel, biting laugh, then lowered his voice and made some comment to Graves. I paid no attention to them, but dropped off to sleep, lulled by the sweeping stars, the whispering pines.

IT is rarely that I sleep soundly. Particularly if I feel there is danger. I'm likely to sleep rather fitfully but this night I dropped off into my half doze almost at once. I was conscious of events, but in a relaxed, drowsy manner as though my mind were occupying a plane apart from my body.

The wind freshened. The great, gleaming stars swung silently over the tops of the black trees. There came the long drawn Whooo. Whooo, Whooo of an owl, the bark of a fox, and then the hysterical crescendo of a coyote. I slept on, dimly conscious of the noises, and then, suddenly, my eyes popped open.

From the side of the road there came the sound of horse's hoofs, hoofs which were muffled in the dust, and which were being kept away from the hard ground by a cautious rider. There came the faint whinny of a horse, just the start of a nickering whinny which was abruptly choked off. Against the black of the pines there showed a still deeper

shadow as a lone horseman rode past not over twenty yards away. From the bed of Pedro Murietta there came a faint cough. Dick Graves slept on, his raucous snores gurgling, through the cold air.

I lay awake, listening, but kept my breathing deep and regular. To my wrist was fastened a strip of buckskin, and to this strip of buckskin was fastened my gun. I drew it up and into my hand, waiting and ready.

Pedro Murietta stirred, and I managed to twist my neck so that I could watch his blanket roll without attracting attention. I even snored slightly, lending weight to my deceptive slumber.

After a moment's tense silence, during which I fancied Pedro was surveying the landscape, watching me in particular, I could see his bare arm come from his blankets and reach out to Graves' bed. It was just the dull gleam of white flesh against the black of the blankets, but easily visible in the light of the stars. There was no whisper, nothing but the gleam of the arm, and then, suddenly, Dick Graves stopped snoring.

After a minute there came a rustle from the other blankets, and the two men stole silently off and into the night. I waited patiently, my gun in hand. From down the road there came the soft purr of a powerful, multi-cylindrical car. I know automobiles, and I would have known that engine even did I not get a glimpse of the huge trunk on the rear end as the machine swept past. The girl was at the wheel and I caught a glimpse of others in the car.

Once more there was silence. I lay waiting, dozing from time to time in a series of cat naps, seeking to get rest while there was a chance, for I realized that trouble was brewing, trouble which might break that night, the next day or the next week.

At length I heard the snap of a twig, and then two dark shapes came from the trees, following along the road.

The shorter shadow detached from the other and came toward my bed, moving with soft, stealthy steps. I could smell the reek of whiskey as Dick Graves leaned over me. He didn't know it, but there was a gun trained on his heart. But at length, satisfied by my even, regular breathing, and apparently having had no other purpose in view in approaching my bed than to see if I was awake, Dick Graves moved on and once more rolled into his blankets. Pedro Murietta came stealing from the darkness, and slipped between the folds of his bed as silently as a cat stalking game in the night.

I heaved a sigh and relaxed. He had come near death, this Dick Graves, slipping up to the bed of Black Barr in the darkness.

Again there was silence. The wind went down and the pines ceased to whisper. I could feel the frost forming in the black silence of the cold night, and once more there came the pad, pad of horse's hoofs and the horseman went stealing on past where we were sleeping.

I dozed off, sleeping lightly, my gun in my hand. At length the east began to pale slightly. The pines seemed to assume shape instead of outline, and there came the dancing of headlights down the road, the purr of a motor, and the car came past us once more, rushing down the road in a swirl of dust.

I arose, dressed and rolled my blankets. The cover was white with frost, and grew wet as the frost melted. All around was a white carpet except where my blankets had been spread. The other two men got up. Pedro Murietta, lean, snaky of eye as ever, sat erect in bed and reached for a cigarette with his long, tapering fingers. Before he dressed he smoked two of them, inhaling great lungfuls of the smoke, and exhaling in two long streams through his dilated nostrils.

Dick Graves rolled over, reached under his pillow, and extracted a round,

black bottle. He elevated this to his lips, and gurgled several swallows, then wiped his flabby mouth with the back of his great hand, and leered around at the plateau, his eyes swollen, the puffs beneath his eyes and upon his cheeks seeming greatly enhanced. His thin hair was rumpled over his bloodshot eyes.

"Good morning, gentlemen," I said.

As I spoke there came the purr of a motor. The sedan slipped through the dust and came to a stop.

"All ready?" called the cheerful voice of Miss Jean Page of the Diamond M.

By way of answer I picked up my roll of blankets and advanced toward the car.

"I slept down the road aways," she remarked by way of explanation.

The others exchanged glances, and then Dick Graves twisted his thick lips into a smile and gave forth a coarse, husky snicker, a snicker that reeked with the odor of cheap whiskey. I said nothing.

"A little frosty last night, Mr. Black," she said to me, seeking nervously to draw me out. The others she did not notice, but she apparently wished some comment from me.

I nodded and touched my hat.

"It was up here. You seem to have made a more fortunate selection of a camping place because your blanket cover is dry."

She bit her lip at that, then started to speak, thought better of it, leaned from the window of the car and addressed the two men.

"Hurry, please," she said, then continued to watch them, her face averted.

When she started the car I was able to see her profile. There were dark rings under her eyes, and her mouth drooped. She drove the car in a tired manner, not taking the energy to avoid the bumps in the road, but following the course of least resistance, keeping the wheels in the ruts.

Within half an hour we arrived at a

post. Fifteen minutes later we dropped down the side of a grade, into a little canyon lined with trees, out upon an open flat where there were buildings stretched in the rambléd, orderly confusion of a cattle ranch, slipped through a gate, into a yard and stopped.

"There is the bunk house," she said, and pointed toward a building standing with closed doors and windows.

The men in the rear seat tumbled out and began to tug their blankets from the rack. I stepped to the rear of the machine, opened the trunk, heaved my blankets to my shoulder and entered the house. There were bunks stretched along one wall sufficient for ten people. A stove, table and chairs completed the equipment. On the bunks were straw mattresses.

I was the last in and had no curiosity concerning the rest of the place, so I dumped my dunnage on the bunk nearest the door and window.

Almost at once I was struck by the peculiar atmosphere of the place. There was the odor of tobacco smoke clinging to the walls, and mattresses, tobacco smoke which was stale but not old. There were papers scattered on the floor, a safety razor blade still moist, yet with no rust, a discarded pair of socks, a torn hat, various odds and ends, and underlying the entire atmosphere was a sensation of recent occupancy, as though men had been hurriedly gathered together and taken from the house on a moment's notice.

We were the only men on the ranch so far as any signs in the bunkhouse were concerned, and there remained a haunting impression of recent company. I felt my attention attracted by a spot on the mattress, and turned it back to look at the under side. The mattress had been soaked in blood, and the soaking had been recent.

I unrolled my blankets with a sigh. Here was mystery. Here was I running into the very things I had sought to avoid—a ranch of mystery, of night meetings, of mysterious evacuations of

the bunkhouse when we were expected to arrive. The woman, tired as she was, had considered it necessary to come ahead and remove the men who were left on the ranch before our arrival. Some man had pad-padded slowly on a dark horse through the night, searching for the place where we were camped, and, when he had found that place two men had gone to hold some conversation with him. For some mysterious reason I had not been consulted or requested to be present.

I looked up as a shadow darkened the door.

The man who was standing in the doorway had a face as black and hairy as I had ever seen. His eyebrows were great and shaggy and hung down on each side of his eyes. Upon his upper lip was a great, drooping black mustache that stretched to his chin. His shock of black hair was parted in the middle, so that it, too, drooped on either side. There were, then, three sets of drooping, black hair, sloping over each side of his face, all slanting at about the same angle. His eyes were coal black, and in them there burned a fire of deep intensity.

"I'm Bill Purdy, and I'm foreman here," he announced in a deep voice, a voice which boomed through the bunkhouse. "You men will be under my orders, and when I tell you to do anything I want it done. Let's understand each other right at the start."

He paused and looked us over, and I took a violent distaste for the man. I saw that Dick Graves, whiskey sodden bum that he was, made no attempt to meet those black eyes for more than a second. He lowered his gaze and mumbled something under his breath. Pedro Murietta exhaled a cloud of smoke when the black eyes were turned upon him, and returned the stare for a second or two, and in that gaze of his there seemed to be a subtle something I could not place for the moment; then his eyes also sought the floor, and the shaggy head turned to me, the black

eyes searching my own, beating upon me with a stare so fierce that had I been accustomed to give in to my fellow men I too would have lowered my eyes. But I hadn't been.

He sensed something of this, for he glowered at me, and I could feel my own spirits rise. It was by an effort that I prevented my face from breaking into that twisting smile of the lips which is with me a sort of unconscious forewarning that I'm damn handy with my gun.

For three long minutes we stared into each other's eyes like a couple of schoolboys trying to stare each other down, and yet there was something behind it all, a deadly menace of inner hatred.

At length he spoke, and that menace was in his voice.

"You, my man, will go to the west line of the ranch and ride line, and you'll start immediately."

I kept my eyes boring into his face.

"When you have occasion to address me, you may call me Black," I suggested.

"I might call you Buzzard Bait if you don't watch your step on this range," he said.

This time I would have no mistaking of my meaning. I thrust my face close to his, and my hand was ready for its swoop should there be occasion.

"Buzzards require more than one meal in order to live," I pointed out. "You . . . will . . . address . . . me as . . . Black."

He yielded the point then and he yielded strangely. I was not his man, nor would I be called such. He would understand me or I would make him. I had fancied that he would finally yield with bad grace, but his face suddenly broke into a smile, and there was a certain charm about him when he smiled.

"Very well, *Mister Black*," he smiled, "would you mind taking a saddle horse and pack horse and riding the west line? You will be gone for two, perhaps three days, and I would like to have the fence inspected."

"Fence?" I asked.

He nodded.

"The west line is fenced, fifteen miles of fence stretching straight across the country. The rest of the range is open."

"Why fence one line at such expense and leave the rest open?"

The smile faded from his face, and he darted a look of quick suspicion into my eyes.

"You will find out more about the ranch by riding over it than by asking questions in the bunkhouse," he said. "You may take your pick of horses in the corral to the east of the bunkhouse, and there are saddles in the barn."

I arose without another word and started for the barn, brushing past him as I went through the door, and from the physical contact there came a strange thrill for battle. It was as though he was charged with some repulsive electrical current, and when I touched him there nearly came an explosive spark, a spark of action which would have indeed left one of us Buzzard Bait.

I walked to the barn to pick out a saddle, while Purdy stayed behind and had some talk with the others. I could hear their voices coming through the open door. Apparently they had much to talk over for they all three talked, sometimes all three at once, and their tones were rapid as men who had much to say in a limited time.

While I was running my eye over the saddles they came out and stood near me. Somehow I sensed that the danger of actual contact, of conflict, had passed, that there was a desire to break my spirit, to force me to acknowledge some fear. I kept my eyes upon the saddles.

Here again was evidence that all was not as it should be at the Diamond M. There were fully fifteen saddles strung up there on pegs, saddles of all sorts and descriptions. I let my eye rove carefully over the lot, and noticed on several of them those reddish black

spots which seem encrusted upon the leather, look dead black yet have a dull reddish gleam underlying the black. Those spots when once seen are never forgotten, spots of dried blood on saddle leather.

Upon one saddle in particular there was blood, and this blood was not as old as the others. It still retained its gleam of red, and the red had not turned to the same shade of black as the others. I felt Purdy's eyes upon me as I looked at that saddle, and it suddenly came to me that he expected me to ask questions, to show some fear. I looked again at it, saw with a careful appraisal that it would be comfortable for a man of my build, and lifted it down from the peg.

Purdy sneered.

"That is a hoodoo saddle. The first man who rode in that saddle made an excellent meal for the buzzards. The next man saved his life only by chance and will be crippled all his days. The third man lost much blood from a bullet in the shoulder."

I nodded casually, took the saddle to the watering trough and began to wash off the blood.

"In that case I will give it a fresh start," was all I said. Had they expected me to show the white feather, to drop the saddle and choose another, they were mistaken.

Having washed the saddle, I took a rope and entered the corral. There was a massive, rangy black there who showed the whites of his eyes. He was full of spirit and fire, and it was apparent that he had great speed, apparent, also, that he was wise in the ways of the cattle country, and that he saved himself much work by assuming a mean expression whenever a man entered the corral.

One knows horses either by instinct, or he doesn't know horses. There is no middle ground. I watched the black. He tossed his head and rolled his eyes, and as his head came above the milling mass of backs and tossing manes, I

made a flip of the rope from my waist. The distance was short and I didn't whirl the rope. To whirl the rope in a corral means that the horses become excited. A flip of the rope attracts less attention. It requires more skill, but it is more conducive of results.

The rope settled about the head of the giant black, and I led him from the corral, haltered him, and put on my saddle. He smelled of me with great, quivering nostrils, snorted, pulled back, rolled his eyes until the great veins of red could be seen flecking the whites, lay back his ears, tightened the muscles of his great stomach and fought against the cinch.

I paid not the slightest attention to him, but went about saddling him as though he were the gentlest horse in Arizona. Neither did I pay any attention to the others, although I could feel their eyes boring into my back. I put on a bridle, gathered the reins, cast loose the halter and swung into the saddle.

I felt the great body beneath me gather its muscles into knots, felt my arms ache with the pull as the heavy head went down, and then, with arched back and stiff legs the black went into the air. He threw his head to one side, giving an impression to the rider of coming down on that side, and then lit stiff legged on the ground, and, even as he lit, threw himself to the other side and started another jump. It was a cruel jar, a sudden spring, and the heavy horse was almost unbelievably quick on his feet, a quickness which came because of his splendid muscles. Also there was intelligence, for when he found that I did not lose my seat, that I came down balanced in the saddle, adjusted myself to the sideways roll and went with him for the second jump properly balanced, he abruptly ceased his bucking, and stood still, quivering slightly, but still.

I laughed at that. I had sized the horse up right. He was too shrewd to waste his strength and nervous en-

ergy with a rider he couldn't throw. He would pose as an outlaw, would attempt to master his rider, but, when he found that he was mastered, he would yield and become a loyal mount.

I swung from his saddle, patted his neck, and tied him. I could see the three men watching me with puzzled expressions. Dick Graves was watching wide-eyed, his alcohol-steeped brain filled with wonder. Pedro Murietta had frank admiration underlying the puzzled expression of his eyes; but in the eyes of Bill Purdy, the foreman, there was an expression of amazement, more, there was an expression of cold rage, of deadly malice.

I said nothing, nor did they, but I went to my roll, drew out a pair of blankets and slicker, rolled and tied them on behind the saddle, and not until then, turned to Purdy.

"Show me where I eat. I'll get a snack of breakfast and throw some chuck into the saddle bags."

He spoke shortly.

"You'll need a pack. You may be out three days and it'll be cold."

I made no reply, but stood waiting to be shown where to eat. He squirmed uneasily as I made no reply, then pointed to the ranch house.

"We haven't enough men to keep a cook. Miss Page does the cooking."

He spoke the words with ill grace. By ignoring his suggestion about the pack horse, I had gained a point. Now I strode to the kitchen, leading the way for the others, wondering the while at the exigencies that would force a slender, refined girl such as Jean Page to cook for coarse cowpunchers such as she had employed.

The girl had breakfast on the table. We trooped in, sat down and began to eat with that silence which bespeaks hunger and the slight restraint which comes upon men of the open when they gather within four walls.

"I'd like a little extra chow, Miss Page," I said. "I'm leaving on a two or three-day trip."

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As though the words had been filled with some deadly significance, she turned on her heel and looked at me wide-eyed. Her face as white as chalk.

Her words were addressed to Bill Purdy, the dark foreman.

"Not . . . not . . . not the west line?"

He nodded, his mouth chewing his food, but his eyes filled with some peculiar expression of cold power, an expression which I could not fathom.

"No, no. Not him! Not this one!" she exclaimed.

Purdy said nothing but continued to chew his food, taking a great gulp from a cup of coffee, his eyes on the woman's face.

At length that silent stare had its effect. She sighed and turned to the stove, then began to wrap up food in flour sacks. I could hear the rustle of paper, the snap of twine.

"I don't need much, ma'am. I'm only takin' my saddle bags."

She made no reply direct, but continued with the work, yet when she handed me the food, she had tied it up securely in two heavy bags.

"You can swing these on each side of the saddle. They'll hold more than the saddle bags."

I nodded my thanks, scraped back my chair, and went out into the sunlight. Without a word of farewell, I swung into my saddle, spun the black and started for the gate to the yard.

"Hey you!" yelled Purdy from the doorway of the kitchen. "How are you goin' to find the west line?"

I pointed to the west.

"By riding west," I said.

He lowered his shaggy brows.

"But you don't know the ranch."

"I will when I get back," I said, clapped a spur into the black, and shot through the gate with a clatter of hoofs and a cloud of dust, dropped down into a draw and was concealed from the house.

I gave the black his head and he followed a trail which ran up the draw.

on an angle, topped a small ridge, dropped into a grassy meadow beside which ran a small stream, and then headed west toward a jagged sweep of pine clad ridges.

It seemed good to have a horse under me, to be once more in the open, riding over a strange country. I thrilled with the power of the great beast beneath me, his muscles working smoothly under the saddle as he lowered his head, stuck forward his ears and climbed a steep bit of trail, slowed up at the top long enough to take in and expel a great lungful of air, then felt his way down the steep drop in the trail on the other side.

On all sides there were cattle bearing the brand of the Diamond M., cattle which seemed in prime condition. The country was more dry than would have been expected considering the elevation, but here and there were springs. The warm sunshine swept down upon the earth like a golden blanket, the air was clear, warm, yet bracing, and over all stretched the blue black of a southern sky.

IT was mid-afternoon before I noticed a fence which stretched in a straight line across the country. I swung to the south so as to intercept the fence at the southwest corner of the ranch. I was curious about the fence which merely marked the one boundary, a fence which must have been put in at great expense.

At length I came to a point from which I could see the start of the fence, and I began to realize why there was no need for one south of that point. There rose a great ridge of barren, almost perpendicular rock, a ridge which swept in a general easterly and westerly direction, and the fence tied into this ridge of rock. Satisfied, I turned and began to work toward the north, keeping as close to the fence as possible, at times being within a few feet of it, and then again being a hundred yards away.

At dark I hobbled the black; found myself a place against a rocky bank where I could build a fire. I made the fire some distance from the sheer rock and made it long and narrow. All evening I fed it with great logs, and finally had a huge bed of coals, coals upon which I piled some thick logs. I then spread my blankets between the fire and the rock. The huge blaze had warmed the rock, and the coals on one side and the heat from the rock, as well as the reflected heat from the fire, kept me warm and cozy through a night in which there was again a heavy frost.

An hour after sun-up I was in the saddle again, following along the fence, and wondering why the statement that I was to ride the western line had resulted in such emotion on the part of the girl, wondering what strange force of circumstances had caused this girl to be the owner of an Arizona cattle ranch.

By eleven o'clock I was nearing the northern boundary. Here was a sweep of rolling country, country where pines grew in straggling groups, where sage brush gave a deep purple tint to the distances, and where grass grew in patches. I could look to the west and see that the country opened out within the space of a half a mile into a great, fertile valley, a valley which seemed to be watered by a stream of sufficiently ample proportions to mean a steady flow. The fence paralleled that stream but was on the ridge to the east of the valley. I could not help but speculate how much the value of the ranch would be enhanced did it but include that long, fertile valley, and then my thoughts were interrupted by a fierce whine, a swift hum, and a breath of cold air fanned my face in a sharp current.

Almost unconsciously I spun the black and searched the direction from which there came the crack of a firearm. The bullet had missed my face by a matter of inches, by less than a foot. Some two hundred yards ahead was a thick clump of pines, and behind those pines

was an outcropping of rock. As I looked over the country I caught the faintest flicker of motion from behind that clump of pines, and there came the hum of another bullet. Behind me there was a level stretch without much cover. The first miss had apparently rattled the man who shot from ambush. It has been my experience that a man who will shoot from ambush is such a coward that he must hit on the first shot, or not at all. The fact that he had chanced his first shot at such long range indicated that he was nervous, was afraid of himself.

In place of retreating I clapped spurs into the black and charged. The move was unexpected and there came two shots in such swift succession that the taking of aim in between was impossible, and then from behind the clump of pines there came a horseman, spurring a gray horse in a swift dash.

For a moment I saw him, and then he snapped around a ridge. I raced the black to the ridge, and saw the gray horse a hundred and fifty yards away, topping a rocky rise. With a swift motion of my arm I fired, and saw the dust fly from the rider's shoulder. Fully aware of the folly of such pursuit, where the man ahead could stop and ambush me as I came charging over some ridge, yet enraged enough to desire his blood, I dashed forward.

On top of the rocky pitch I paused. There was no one in sight. The country stretched away calm and peaceful, a scud of cloud dazzling in its fleecy whiteness, its edges sharply outlined against the dark blue of the sky, swept rapidly toward me, borne on the wings of one of those winds which sweep up in the high places of the earth. There was no sign of man.

Then from a draw half a mile away there emerged the gray horseman, still traveling at a wild gallop, but swaying slightly in the saddle. He had taken advantage of the dip to double on his course behind the ridge, to gain another ridge, and so to get a headstart that

placed him out of range. I was not foolish enough to trail the man, pursuit was one thing, but painfully following the tracks of a running horse with a desperate man watching the back trail from some point of vantage was quite another. We had exchanged compliments, and that was enough. I noticed that his right arm dangled from the shoulder and I felt that I would know the man if I should meet him in the near future.

I turned my black and got down from the skyline.

There has been much written about ambushes and ambushing. To a man following a set trail or any given general course, an ambush can be made fatal one hundred per cent of the time if the one laying in wait can but control his nerves. For the man following a rambling course over open country where cover is rather scarce, the ambusher has no great advantage. I had played into the hands of the man who had lain in wait for me by following a course parallel to the fence wherever possible.

He had counted on that, and, had I not deviated slightly from my course in order to take a look at a little flat to my right, he would have had a shot at me from less than twenty yards. I rode back to the place of the ambush and found that he had used a rifle, also found that he must have been there for more than two hours, judging from the stubs of cigarettes. He had dropped the rifle when he had made his dash for the horse, which had been kept standing behind the outcropping. I picked up the rifle and rode on, but I went in a course of zig-zags, half circles, touching the fence at different points on an angle, and not riding parallel to it.

At length, as the sun was well past the meridian, I swung back to strike the fence, and did not find it at the point I had fancied it should be. I pressed on, and, as I still did not find the fence, but found myself in a long, rolling sweep of country which seemed

to open into the fertile valley of the stream I had noticed earlier in the day, I pressed the black forward at increased speed, wondering what had happened to the fence.

Then, as I rounded a hill, I saw a rider coming toward me. He was a short, lithe man, mounted on a small-boned sorrel that stepped with little mincing steps, frequently tossing its head and switching its tail. I knew the type of horse, and knew the symptom. The horse had not been ridden a mile from where it had been saddled, was not as yet well warmed up, and was one of those nervous little beasts that waste much energy at the start of a trip and peter out at the end. The man was apparently moving to intercept me, and I turned the black so that I would meet him. I was carrying the rifle across the saddle, and had seen to it that it was loaded. There were three shells left.

As the horseman came closer I could see that he was one of those wiry, quick moving individuals who are filled with energy, dominant, driving, driving themselves as well as others.

"Where do you think you are?" he called, his tone rasping across the few feet that separated us.

I looked at the thin line of his mouth, the high cheek bones, the little, gleaming eyes, the stubby, nervous fingers and saw that here was a man who was irritated by anything that bordered upon the frivolous.

"Why, ain't this Arizona?" I asked innocently. "I haven't crossed the state line into California yet, have I?"

His face darkened.

"You're riding a Diamond M horse and you're on the Bar C ranch. Your line is a quarter of a mile east of here."

I grinned.

"That's fine, I like the looks of the Bar C."

He studied me for a minute, then his lips compressed.

"My name's Horton, and I'm the owner of the Bar C. There ain't the

best of feelin' with the Diamond M, and I'll ask you to get off. I ain't sayin' nothin' else to you right now because I can see that you're a new man an' I guess yuh didn't know where yuh was gittin'. If I thought yuh'd come across purposely, an' knew what yuh was doin', I'd give yuh another sort of a message."

With the words he glanced meaningly at the revolver which swung at his hip.

I looked him over.

"That," said I, slow enough so the words would sink in, "is a bluff, and a damned big bluff."

His face flushed and his hand quivered, but I held his eyes with my own.

"Somebody else started to hand me one of those messages you're talkin' about, an' I sent it back to him with interest. I wouldn't doubt now if that was a Bar C. rifle I'm holding in my hand."

At the words he gave a start, and lowered his eyes to the gun. His face told me all that I needed to know, for I could see his eyes bulge and the flush deepen. He started to say something, stopped, sucked in his breath, and fidgeted in the saddle. I could see that he had lost his belligerency. He wanted to explain, to ask questions. As for myself, I could feel the old lust of battle coming on.

"I'm going back to the Diamond M. grounds," I told him, and I could see his face lighten at the words, an expression of relief, "and then I'm going to ride right on back, an' ride back without the rifle. You've got a six-gun and I've got one. We'll then find out just what your message would have been to a man who had known this was Bar C range, because I'll know it when I come back."

With that I spurred the black, swinging away in a great half circle from which I could always keep my eye on the owner of the Bar C.

After half a mile I angled back to the fence, followed to a point where it abruptly ended in the middle of a

grassy, open space, and then dropped the rifle against one of the strands of wire, and rode out into the Bar C. There was no trace of Horton. He had thought better of the situation and had beat it. Apparently the man was no gun-fighter.

I went back to the fence, picked up the rifle and turned east. My instructions had been to cover the western line of fence, and I had covered it. No one had said what to do next, so I made tracks for the bunkhouse of the Diamond M. and did a little thinking.

I HAD been sent into an ambush. There had been no need of that trip of inspection to the western line. The woman had known I was going to my death. "No, no, not that one," she had said. She might have preferred that one of the others receive the lead of the person who lay in ambush, but she knew that the one who went would be in danger, and she had said nothing to me. Bill Purdy had deliberately singled me out as the one to go into that ambush. Had I known there was a feud between the two ranches, had he warned me that there would be danger, to beware of ambush, I would have been proud at having been selected as the one to encounter the odds he would not dare risk himself, but he had sent me out without warning. The only logical conclusion was that he had known there was danger, and that he had sent me into it hoping that I would not return.

It was dark when I came down the last ridge and into the yard of the Diamond M. The lights were just commencing to glow from the ranch house and from the bunkhouse. The light of the western sky had dimmed into a brassy afterglow.

I turned my horse loose in the corral, pegged my saddle, and walked into the bunkhouse. There was a light there but no one was present. I surmised they were having chow and went up to the ranch house. In the dining-room I found them. Dick Graves showed mild

curiosity in his face when I entered. Pedro Murietta started and I fancied paled slightly, but it was Bill Purdy who showed emotion. He acted as one who had seen a ghost, his eyes opening until they were lost beneath the bushy brows. His mustache working back and forth as his lips quivered, and I could almost fancy his hair bristled.

I gave them but a hasty glance, and then looked at Jean Page. She, too, was showing emotion, but of a different sort, for upon her face was a look of relief.

I had always had a taste for the dramatic, and here was a chance for me to convey my message in a way more potent than words. I sat down at the table, placed my captured rifle against the wall, took a rag and cleaning rod from my pocket, and, before I ate a bite, ran the oiled rag through the revolver, then I slipped back the loads, put the weapon in my holster and helped myself to the food.

Bill Purdy shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Any trouble?"

"None at all," I replied between bites.

"How was the fence?"

I turned to look at him. There was in the back of my mind a vague theory, a theory I wanted to demonstrate.

"There's something funny about that fence. The wire in it has been cut and repaired time without number."

That time I could see I had him worried. He lowered his eyes and thought for a minute.

"Miss Page is a little new to the cattle ranching business," he said. "Don't worry her with trifles. She inherited the property from her father, and doesn't understand that the cuts in the fence are made for the purpose of moving cattle back and forth and for horsemen to get through. The fence has been there for some time, and when Jim Page was alive we used to be right friendly with the Bar C and to go back and forth quite a bit."

"Yeah," I said, "you must have—quite a bit."

At that he drew back his chair.

"Perhaps you'll wonder why I'm so concerned about Jean, boys, so I may as well tell yuh all. Jean and I are going to be married tomorrow."

I shot a swift glance at the girl. Her face was flushed and averted. Bill made the statement in a loud assertive manner. Pedro Murietta gave a swift flash of his dark eyes, then resumed eating. Dick Graves gave the matter no thought. He did not even pause in between bites.

"Congratulations *if that is true*," I said.

Bill Purdy glowered at me.

"Why say if it's true?"

"Because it isn't tomorrow yet," I answered, meeting his eyes.

The girl turned to me swiftly. In her eyes I could read desperation. I have always been one to speak my mind, and, on this occasion I handed it to her.

"Miss Page, please don't think I'm butting in, but I'd like to know one or two things. Were you ever on the ranch before your father's death?"

I could see her eyes widen as she shook her head.

"No, father died and I came out from the East to see about a sale. For some reason the property seemed to have no market, and so I came to manage it myself."

I nodded.

"I see, and Mr. Purdy was a foreman for your father?"

"Yes," she answered, puzzled. "Why?"

I could see Purdy begin to bristle, and I knew I had to talk quickly and to the point.

"Because I think that west fence has been moved this way about three-quarters of a mile. There was trouble between the two ranches or your father would not have fenced the west boundary line. Three-quarters of a mile west of the present fence line there are two natural barriers into which the fence line could tie. In its present place the fence ends abruptly on the north in the middle of an open space. The fence

has been mended in so many places that it looks as though it was taken in sections and moved bodily."

"What?" yelled Purdy as he jumped to his feet. "You intimate that such a thing could have been done beneath my eyes and that I would not have known it?"

I let him have it at that.

"That isn't what I said," I remarked, evenly, casually, "and it isn't what I think. Miss Page, I'd certainly have a surveyor out to check the west line of this ranch before any statute of limitations runs against you to make you lose the legal title to the property that's the best grazing land of the ranch, and before I contemplated matrimony."

Purdy pounded his great fist on the table.

"That would mean that you insinuate I am a crook."

I smiled, my eyes hard and on his.

"Yes."

His hand started toward his hip, and then stopped as the girl screamed.

"Don't!" she shrielled, "don't make any trouble. Please!"

I saw a cold, calculating look of shrewd cunning come into Purdy's eyes.

"I am glad you have spoken as you did, Black. I, myself will order a surveyor to come out here the first of the week. You are suspicious, you are officious, and you are a fool!"

I grinned at him.

"And the next time you send me out to be killed," I told him, "be sure that you send someone who has guts enough to do the job. One of your men has already bungled."

With that I banged the door and left him to his own thoughts. I had acted on impulse, much of what I had said had been the wildest form of conjecture, but I felt that there was some chance I was right, and I didn't propose to see a girl like Jean Page throw herself away upon a man of the calibre of Bill Purdy.

There would be an accounting later. Right or wrong I was in for it now. I

went out to the bunkhouse and sat down, waiting until such time as Bill Purdy should see fit to demand an explanation. Minutes passed and still he did not come. I got up and took a stroll in the still night air, pacing back and forth, looking up at the stars, seeking to puzzle out some of the riddles of the Diamond M. Had the fence really been moved? If not, what had been the object of placing it there open at the north? Did the girl love Bill Purdy or did he have some hold on her? Why did some person wish to have me killed? Was Jean Page in on the secret of my proposed assassination when I was sent to ride the west line?

As I thought, I paced farther and farther into the darkness. At length I heard the sound of voices coming from the back of the corral.

"Get him into town, and then I will see that men come in who can handle him, men who will damn well make buzzard bait out of him and it won't look as though we were in on it."

The voice was that of Bill Purdy.

"Si, senor," came Pedro Murietta's reply.

I grinned as I retraced my steps. So there was to be action after all, was there? I went back to the bunkhouse and sat down, waiting.

Within five minutes Pedro Murietta was at the door of the bunkhouse, and he went to his war bag and began to bring out finery of a sort, a few trick trinkets which had appealed to the savage which lay dormant in the back of his mind, smothered by only a trace of white blood, a savage that was near the surface in him that night if I could judge by the reddish tinge which I saw in his restless eyes.

"I go to town," he said, and paused.

I yawned.

"What sort of a town?"

"Ah, a most wonderful town. It is to the north. The Senor Purdy told me of it. Five miles down the road it lies, and there are pool halls, places where booze may be had, and a dance

which starts in the back of the pool hall whenever enough men from the ranches come in to the place."

I made it easy for him by arising, yawning, and announcing my intention of accompanying him.

Twenty minutes and we were on our way. Despite the fact that I had ridden much since early morning, I felt fresh and keen. There was no sign of Bill Purdy, and I was satisfied he had galloped on ahead to make all the necessary arrangements, a belief that was intensified by the manner in which Pedro insisted upon holding the horses down to a slow pace. At the last moment I had yielded to a bit of vanity. In a roll on the back of my saddle was the coal black outfit which had helped so much to give me the name of Black Barr. If there was any serious effort to be made to take my life I determined that I would have the pleasure of facing the situation in my true character, and I knew, also, that a knowledge of my real identity might be the means of causing my enemies to call a truce. His reputation traveled far, and it had not suffered in the traveling. There were few gunmen in the Southwest who would willingly match speed with Black Barr.

The so-called town was little more than some dozen structures, unpainted, rough, uncouth, placed out there on the Gila Mesa as a gathering place for men from the cattle ranches, traps where the cowpunchers might drop their wages and fatten the purses of human vultures.

There was a pool room and dance hall where a bar sheltered various illegal concoctions which were kept in bottles behind the protection of the mahogany and ladled out a glass at a time. The precaution was not because of fear of the law in this distant place, but rather to emphasize the fact that a law was being violated and that the price was fixed accordingly.

I cared nothing for the booze nor for the women. I had come to be killed and it was in that process that I was

interested. There were a few men gathered about the bar or playing cards, and I fancied they looked at me with more than passing interest, but they all seemed to be men who were incapable of taking the lead in a matter of this kind, men who were spectators rather than killers. There is a look about the true gunman which one who has faced death on the border frequently, can read at a glance. These men were cow-punchers, and, while they wore guns, they were not killers.

A dark-haired girl with great black eyes and cheeks that were coarse and grainy under the red paint swept up to me and asked me to buy her a drink. I refused. Too many times a woman can be bought to hold on to a man's right arm at the critical instant when his adversary is sweeping his hand toward a revolver.

There was a little blonde, a natural blonde, with light, silky hair, and blue eyes who was watching me from one corner of the room. I could see that there was something wistful in her gaze, and also that she watched me with something of speculation in her eyes. At length she crossed to me and asked me to buy her a drink.

She was one of those thousands of girls who have been plunged into the cold realization of the world when most girls are just blossoming into young womanhood. She was living her life from real or fancied necessity, and already there showed behind the old eyes in that young face the mellowing understanding which comes with much experience, and is usually found in those who have lived long enough to appreciate the futility of devoting everything to the struggle for the selfish gains of the world.

"Buy me a drink, honey," she crooned in her mechanical voice, a voice which had intoned the same formula thousands of times. I was on the point of shaking my head when she added in a voice so low I could hardly hear it. "They are coming to kill you," then

louder, "Take me in the back room and buy me a drink, honey."

There was something of sincerity in her voice and I yielded to her request, not that I needed any further warning, but I did not wish to seem ungrateful, and I wished to learn something of the nature of the danger, to learn, if possible, the appearance of the man who was to be chosen to meet me in a duel to the death. Would they try another ambush or would they try a fair fight.

She led the way into the back room with the brazen boldness which comes to those of her kind who have lived the life of the dance hall so long that they have no recollection of any other.

"It's Bill Purdy and George Horton of the Bar C. They're all worked up about something and they said you had to die. Purdy came gallopin' in, here fifteen or twenty minutes before you got here, found Horton, spilled his troubles to him, an' they've gone off to get some regular gunmen to see that yuh don't get out of here alive."

I laughed a bit at that, the humor of the thing struck me.

"There were two of 'em, and yet they went out to get some more?"

She nodded, wide-eyed, serious.

"How many?" I asked.

"I don't know. There's three of the men of the Bar C that are regular gunmen, fellows they got up from Mexico, and those three have been killing off the cowpunchers at the Diamond M. and making so much trouble for them that they can't run the ranch, but they're mighty slick about it. Most of the time they get the other man to reach for his gun first, and then they can say they shot him in self defense. They're so fast with a gun they can let all of these fellows around here start to draw and then kill them."

The bartender arrived with a drink and I paid him, thanked the girl and started back into the main dance hall. Three gunmen to say nothing of the two principals—this was going to be good, and yet I could see that it might

not be a laughing matter at that. I couldn't allow myself to tangle with the three men at once. I could perhaps beat any one of the three to the draw, but if they all started blazing away at once it would be a different matter.

As I reached the main room there came the clatter of hoofs and the sounds of men dismounting upon the wooden platform in front of the building. The door crashed open and three men stood in the doorway, men who represented the dirty dregs of border life. Two of them were Mexican and one was a sal-low white. They were all three armed with two guns apiece, and they walked with that swaggering gait which characterizes the cheap killer.

Right at the start they singled me out, and the crowd began to back away from the bar, leaving the three on one end, and myself on the other.

"Look at the new Diamond M puncher," remarked one.

"Naw, I don't like to look at 'em," said his companion, "they tell me she picks up the stew bums and gutter snipes of Phoenix an' sends 'em out here. Why should I soil my eyes lookin' at one of 'em?"

They all three laughed, long and boisterously.

I realized that they were without scruple, that they would all three start firing at the first good chance, realized also that, being professional gunmen from the border, men who made it a habit of drifting around to the different ranches where there was trouble, that they would know of Black Barr.

"Say, yuh'd better look at him," urged the other. "He looks like the ace o' spaces on a white tablecloth."

They all laughed at this, and the man who had his back to me deliberately turned around and looked at me, then his lip curled.

"Hell, I knew I shouldn't a' wasted the effort o' turnin' around to look at no gutter snipe. Look at his guns. He's got 'em tied down at the bottom.

What d'yuh s'pose the idea is? Does he think he's a gunman?"

I felt my face commencing to twitch, and held myself by an effort. Now was not the time for me to strike. The last speaker had been the one chosen to kill me. His remarks were deliberately insulting, and when he had turned the others had stepped back to each side, giving him elbow room. His hands were tense, ready, and his elbows had that peculiar crook in them which is the pose of the gunfighter who is ready for action.

I motioned to the blonde.

"Come over here a minute, sister."

She came, wide-eyed, frightened, but game.

"Sneak out to the black horse on the end of the rack, take the roll that's on the end of the saddle and bring it into the back room. Hurry."

She was a game little cuss, and she ran the gamut of the men to get to the door. Thinking they could get me into action by insulting her, they made various vile remarks, slurred her as she passed, their eyes on me, the while.

The girl returned with the bundle and vanished in the back room. I, too walked back while the gibes flew thick and fast. I knew that they intended to kill me as soon as I emerged from that room, was afraid that hostilities would open before I could get in there, but I had a fast desire which grew upon me, to let them see who they were insulting,—after that there would be a reckoning.

Within the room I donned my black chaps, my black hat and neckerchief, handed the girl a bill and my thanks and faced the door.

"You are a brave man," she said, and there was a wistful look in her eyes. "There is a woman who waits for you, and the others have gone for her. You must be careful, for that woman may need you before the night is out."

I looked at her in surprise.

She saw the look in my face.

"I forgot to tell you," she went on,

"I heard them say that the others were going for the woman who waited for you. The man who brought you here has gone and there were others who were to help him."

Then I remembered that Pedro Murietta had left the place while I was having my first drink with the blonde. My attention had been so taken up with the three killers that I had not given his absence a thought. Suddenly I understood. Bill Purdy had some power over Jean Page, had some club which he held over her, by which he subjected her to his will. Now he had decided to marry her, and then my remarks had caused him alarm. He had determined to kill me. That much was plain; but there was more. The girl had been afraid to show her interest before Purdy. To do so would have been to have called for a showdown before she was ready, but she had sought for a chance to see me privately when she could talk, could question, and I, fool that I was, thinking only of my feud with Purdy, had gone from the ranch and left her.

There have been many things said of Black Barr, many things that are true, and many things that are untrue, but before that night it could never have been truthfully said that he ran away from trouble. Death I do not fear as much as cowardice, and it has been my custom to face odds and to fight my way through. This night I saw that there were greater stakes on the table than my own safety, than my own reputation.

There was a window in the room, and I turned toward it, crashed the sash out with a chair and was through it in a matter of seconds. The last look that I had of the dimly lighted room was the blonde waiting there, eyes shining, waving me good-bye and Godspeed. A girl of the half world she was, one whose name I did not know, and yet she had risked her life that she might help me, might help some other woman whose name also she did not know.

There were three killers in the front room who would demand an accounting from her when they found that she had assisted me in making an escape.

I flung myself into the saddle, and called on the black for all he had in him. He had gone far that day, but it had been mostly at a walk over cattle trails. Now I was calling on him for speed over a level road, and he gamely responded.

The black shadows of the pines flew past, the still, keen night air cut my face, stung me sufficiently to cool somewhat the fires of emotion which raged within me. Fool that I was, I had mistaken the acting of the girl, had warned her and by that warning placed her in danger, and then had not realized the strategy to which she had resorted. As a result she faced danger, death, disgrace, extortion. . . . Lord only knew what that crowd would do to her. They had a crime to conceal, of that I was certain. There was fraud, collusion between Horton of the Bar C and the crooked foreman of the Diamond M. There was also a young girl, fresh from the East, ignorant of the West, victim of the fraud. She had tackled life's problems gamely, had wrestled with the situation as best she could, and I had warned her against those damn crooks and then had gone and left her in their hands!

The black made time that night, and I flung up before the bunkhouse, swung from the saddle and made for the ranchhouse on the run. There was no one there. The lights burned in some of the rooms, but the place was deserted. The bunkhouse was gloomy and black. There was no trace of either Pedro Murietta or of Dick Graves. The automobile in which I had been brought to the ranch stood in a little shed. I was in need of speed, and here was speed.

A moment's inspection showed me that there was gas, oil and water in the car. The ignition was locked and I hadn't the key, but I found the wires

and short-circuited the ignition wires around back of the switch, twisted them together, stepped on the starter and was off.

I skidded and twisted through the dust of that road, retracing the route over which I had just traveled, urging the car on to the greatest speed at which it was safe to travel, saw the lights of the town before me, kicked out the clutch and gear, coasted to the door of the dance-hall and pool room, slammed on the brake and left the engine running.

As I banged open the doors I saw the three men grouped at the bar, much as they had been when I left them. They had the blonde and were taking their chagrin out on her. There were tears running down the girl's cheeks, as they held her against the bar, insulting her, making vile comments, bulldozing a woman.

At the sound of the banging door they looked up and beheld me standing there, black chaps, hat, shirt and neckerchief, and this time there was no need to restrain my rage. That smile, which is peculiar to me in my moments of anger, was twisting my face. Having once started, that smile, a nervous twitching of the lips, continued, nor could I have stopped it then had I desired to; but there was no desire to do so. These men should know with whom they had trifled.

"BLACK BARR!" yelled one of the men.

One of the others turned white at the name, but the third, he who had been selected to kill me, apparently had not lived long on the border. The name meant nothing to him.

"Well, well," he taunted, "it is our old buzzard bait come back to attend his own funeral. See, he is all wrapped up in mourning for himself."

"Shut up, you fool!" said one of the men next to him, but the man was beyond caution.

Already there showed in his eyes the lust of a killer. His hands were tensed,

his elbows crooked, and he swayed slightly forward on the balls of his feet, poised, ready.

"Go ahead and draw if you feel like that," I said to him shortly. I had no time to waste in preliminaries.

He shook his head.

"Instructions were for us to let you draw first," he sneered. "Come, I am giving you more than an even break."

The two men on either side jumped away from him as though he had some deadly and contagious disease. I reached out swiftly with my arm and slapped his face, and the sting of the blow furnished the incentive that he needed.

"All right," he shouted as he jumped back, his face flushing where my hand had struck. "Damn you, if you've got to have it, here it is!"

With the words his hands raced to his holsters, and I, myself, sprang into action. He was quick in the ordinary sense of the word, but not so quick but what he appreciated that I had beat him to the draw by a wide margin. There came a look of incredulity on his face as he saw my hands start for my guns after he had reached for his, and then saw my weapons flick from their holsters before his own were more than half out.

I would have spared him at the last but it was too late. I pull back the hammers of my guns as I draw them from the holster, release those hammers while the guns are just coming from the top of the holster, and in that brief interval which it takes the hammers to fall, twist the guns to aim. As it was I gave him his life. By chance I was in rare form that night. Never have my muscles worked with smoother precision, never have my nerves been more steady or my aim more deadly. With the killer there are slumps just as with the athlete, the boxer, the billiard player, the tennis player; but this night I was at my best. My bullets tore into the shoulder muscles on each side, and he reeled back under the impact of the forty-five

slugs while his guns were just coming from their holsters.

I turned to the other two who stood, spellbound, speechless with fear.

"Where is the road to the Bar C?" I asked. "I have a matter to take up with the men who have hired you."

In shaking tones one of them told me the way, a matter of some ten miles, taking the first turn to the left.

I stood there, guns in hand, and told them one and all where I stood. Told them that the blonde was to be left alone, that they were to stay away from the Diamond M, told the gunmen that they were to leave the country and start at once; and then I backed through the door and sprang into the car.

THERE was a devil raging within me and it gave me a sense of satisfaction, a thrill of power, to have that great car respond to my touch, to hurl itself through the blackness of the night. I even raised the windshield so that the cold air of the night would strike my face, taking a savage delight in feeling the icy fingers of the wind tear at my fevered forehead.

The lights of the Bar C loomed ahead, and the road swung over a cattle guard, through a fence into a yard where barns and buildings formed a rough enclosure. I switched off the lights and shut off the throttle, purring silently into the yard, and there I disconnected the wires I had twisted together. Stepping from the car, making sure that my guns were loose in their holsters, and that the holsters themselves were swinging free and clear, yet tied at the bottoms, I walked toward the lights of the house. To the left was the bunkhouse, and from it I could hear the laughter of men, the rattle of cards and the click of chips. The ranch house lay straight ahead. There was a light on the porch, a light in the front room, but there was silence in the house, no sound manifested itself or gave evidence of human occupancy.

I stepped lightly on the porch, walked

to the window which opened into the front room, and peered within. There was no one there. Then I stepped around to the side, and, as I did so there came the sound of low sobs, sobs which came from a woman, hopeless, helpless sobs.

There was a window which was partly open, and I noiselessly raised it and stepped in. There was an oil lamp sitting on a little dresser, a few chairs and a bed. On the bed, sprawled out upon her stomach, her head buried in a pillow, lay Jean Page. She had evidently put up a fight, for her clothes were badly torn, her waist had been ripped entirely off, and there were the marks on her bare shoulder where rough fingers had buried themselves in her soft flesh. Her skirt had been ripped and her legs were tied together at the knees with a hair rope, one of those knots which is so simple to look at, yet so deadly in its strength, a knot which a cowboy, a packer or a sailor would use. Her hands were tied at the wrists behind her back, and she had been thrown on the bed like a sack of meal. There was no one else in the room.

I drew my knife and cut the rope which bound her wrists, but she did not even stir when she felt the bonds loosen. The sobs had ceased, and she lay perfectly still. I turned my attention to the other rope, found that I could not cut it without taking a chance of cutting her flesh, and so put down the knife and untied the knot. As she felt the touch of my hands she lay still, almost rigid, and then, when the knot slipped loose she suddenly gathered herself, whirled about on the bed and came at me like a wildcat, fingers bent into claws, pearly teeth gleaming, red lips drawn back.

It was then that she recognized me. She dropped her hands and into her eyes there came a look of great joy.

"You came!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I knew I could depend on you, but I heard they had killed you. Purdy told

me that you were buzzard bait, and . . . Oh, I knew he would do it!"

I patted her shoulder.

"It's all right now, Jean. I'm here. Tell me what happened."

She gave a low laugh, one of those throaty, nervous laughs which are first cousin to hysteria, and she clung to me so tightly that it hardly seemed possible her dainty hands could have so much strength.

"Don't leave me, oh, don't leave me again! You don't understand. Father died, was killed, and he willed me the ranch. Purdy wrote to me that things were so badly involved that the ranch would have to be sold for a song, but I decided to come out and take charge of it, myself. That was only six months ago but it seems like six years. Cattle have disappeared, men have been shot, and I couldn't get any men to stay with their jobs. Finally the place got such a bad reputation that I couldn't even get new men. Just before I came to Phoenix they had another shooting scrape in which one of our men was badly hurt. The Bar C. had imported regular gun fighters, and they just terrorized the country.

"I decided to go into Phoenix and pick up some men and then clean out the bunkhouse before the new men came in, so that the newcomers wouldn't know about the trouble. I got you three men in Phoenix and left you eight or ten miles from the ranch while I drove in, picked up the few men we had left and took them out to where they could catch a stage.

"But Purdy knew what I was going to do, and I'm satisfied he had Pedro Murietta planted in Phoenix so that I would be almost sure to stop him and ask him to work. I think he had Pedro follow me around and put himself in my way.

"Anyway, while I'd never thought much of Bill Purdy, I had never actually suspected him until recently. We had always had trouble with men riding the west line. They had been shot

from ambush, or else had encountered those dreadful gunmen. When Purdy sent you out to ride the west line I was afraid. We had agreed that we weren't going to send men out there any more.

"Then when you were gone Purdy showed me that I was losing money, that I couldn't continue to run the ranch and meet the payments on the money I had borrowed, and he told me that I'd have to marry him in order to hold the property. He said that he was well known in the country and that if I married him and made him a deed to the ranch he could make peace with the Bar C and put the property on a paying basis.

"I wouldn't have considered it for a minute only because of my sister. She's back East in school, and her heart is set on an art education. If I lost the ranch she'd have to leave school and no one knows what would become of her. Mother died when we were girls. Father tried lots of things, and he finally located here. He'd bought the ranch only a year or so before he died, and I'd never seen the place until after his death.

"Tonight when you said what you did I commenced to put things together and saw that you were right. I wanted to have a talk with you and tried to find you after I could get rid of Purdy; but then you were in the bunkhouse with Pedro and I couldn't get word to you. I went back inside the ranch house and waited, satisfied you would come, but you rode off with Murietta instead.

"Then Bill Purdy and Pedro Murietta came back to the ranch in a car they had picked up in town and Purdy, Murietta and Graves all loaded me into it. Purdy said he was going to marry me tonight and that you were dead. I fought, but that was all the good it did me. They tied me up, threw me in here and then the two men went out to the bunkhouse while Purdy and Horton went into town to get a justice of the peace. They have the local justice right under their thumb and he'll do anything

they say. Purdy and Horton have been playing a crooked game all along, both of them against me. They shifted the line fence, took a lot of land that belonged to me, and rustled a lot of spring calves and did lots of things I'm just commencing to find out about. Your remark set me thinking, and I've learned lots from what they said to-night.

"Murietta was in with Purdy. Graves was just a weakling, a great, drunken brute with no strength of character at all, and you were the only one I could have any confidence in. I hoped that you would take things in hand and straighten them out, and then when I saw that being loyal to me had condemned you to death I felt so miserable I wanted to die."

I kept patting her shoulder, soothing her.

"There, there, that's all right. You're all right now," I told her. "I'm here with you, and I'm going to stay."

She looked up at me through misty eyes, her bare throat stretching down in a sweeping curve, the warm flesh of her shoulders against me, lips trembling, arm around my neck.

"You can't stay," she said. "The bunkhouse is full of men who are paid killers. Bill Purdy is coming back with George Horton, and you're all alone. No, no, you must leave me. I'll go through with it now for the sake of sister, but they'll never get a deed to the ranch. I'll play fair with Purdy if he plays fair with me, but I'm not going to let you lay down your life for me."

As she spoke there came the sound of an automobile coming into the yard and stopping before the door, the sound of steps on the wooden porch, and loud, boisterous laughter as men filed into the main room.

There was a coarse jest or two, clearly audible through the thin door, then the sound of liquor gurgling from a bottle. At length Bill Purdy's voice said:

"Well, I'll go get the bride. She's

a little kid that don't know her own mind, but she likes me to be firm with her, and, believe me, I'm going to be firm—plenty firm. Maybe I'd better drop down to the bunkhouse first and bring up the boys. This is going to be *some* wedding."

That was enough. I disengaged the girl's arms, left her on the bed, stepped to the door, noiselessly turned the catch, stepped back, and, as Purdy approached, I raised my foot and gave the door a kick. It banged back against the wall on the other side, and I walked into the room.

"Gentlemen," I said, accenting the word, "Good evening."

There was George Horton, Bill Purdy, a man with a legal looking book whom I took to be a justice of the peace, and another, a shift-eyed individual dressed in the clothes of a cow-puncher.

With an oath Purdy jumped back.

"You!" he exclaimed.

And, suddenly the hands of the shift-eyed man shot toward the ceiling.

"It's Black Barr!" he yelled.

Apparently the name meant nothing to Bill Purdy. He sneered at the cow-puncher.

"Coward," he said. "Who the hell is Black Barr? I'm Bill Purdy, and that's enough. Black Barr, eh? I've said he was buzzard bait once or twice before, and I'll make him buzzard bait. . . . Why didn't you come through the door with drawn guns?"

"I wanted to meet you on equal terms," I said.

He laughed again.

"You damned fool. There's three of us here, all armed, all expert with a gun, and there's a bunkhouse full of men a couple of hundred yards away, men who are picked gun fighters, and you're here alone."

I nodded.

"I consider that is about an equal division of power," I said.

His bushy brows closed together, his forehead lowered in a scowl.

"You do, do you, you damned impertinent. . . ."

With that he raced for his guns. Not only that, but George Horton also dropped his hand to his holster. The events of those few seconds are indelibly graven on my mind. There was the black rage of Bill Purdy, the look of sneaking cunning upon the face of George Horton, the look of terror upon the features of the cowboy who had raised his hands and was still holding them stretched aloft as though trying to reach the ceiling with his fingers. The justice of the peace, a weak looking individual with wavy hair, receding chin, and pasty complexion, had his jaw dropped so far that it looked as though his chin would fall off.

Bill Purdy was the one to reach his guns first, but Horton was a close second; both were fairly fast. My own guns were blazing as they drew. Horton dropped stone dead with the bullet in his heart. Purdy staggered back, shocked by my bullet which had torn through his lungs, but managing to fire as he fell.

I grabbed the girl and raced with her to the car, leaving the justice of the peace and the cowpuncher to attend to Purdy.

"You sit here in the machine," I told her. "Wait for me. If anyone approaches the car, toot the horn. If I don't come back within five minutes, or if you hear any shooting and see anyone come out of the bunkhouse before I do, start driving like the devil, and don't stop until you reach Phoenix."

While I was talking I had re-connected the ignition wires, and had the motor running. Before she had a chance to reply I had plunged toward the bunkhouse.

The distance from the ranch house was such that the cowpunchers, absorbed in their cards as they were, had failed to notice the firing. My appearance at the door came as a surprise to the eight men who were sitting grouped around the table. Dick Graves was so

drunk that he could not keep in a chair but had sprawled out on a bunk. Pedro Murietta was there, his inevitable cigarette in his fingers, smoke pouring through his distended nostrils, and there also were a nondescript variety of men, including one man with a bandaged shoulder. I ventured that I could tell when he had received the wound which had incapacitated that shoulder.

For a full minute the men stared at me as I stood in the doorway. Their hands holding their poker cards in fan shaped order, their eyes wide and growing wider as they took in the apparition in black in the doorway.

I heard a shout of "Black Barr" from some one of the crew and then Pedro Murietta arose.

"So the Señor Black, was in reality the famous Señor Black Barr. You caused yourself unnecessary trouble, Señor, for I would have been with you from the start had I known of your identity. I have a document here in my breast that contains much evidence that you should have, shows in writing things which you only suspect as yet. It gives me pleasure to present this document to you—a present from Pedro Murietta to Black Barr."

There was that in the last sentence which prepared me for what was to come, but nothing could prepare me for the incredible speed of the man. His gun dangled at his hip, and he raised his hands carelessly, casually to his coat, drew back the lapel as though reaching for a document, hesitated slightly, got his hand poised in exactly the right position, and then moved the shoulder with a speed and grace which I have seldom seen equaled.

I was prepared, however, prepared because I suspected he had another concealed gun, because I knew something of his breed, knew of the inherent treachery of men like him, knew of his iron nerve, and then there was that momentary pause in the motion of his hand, that desire to get it poised in just the right place before he started that

downward swoop, that slight tension which became apparent upon his face.

My own hands dropped in that swift loop which is the rhythm of motion, which is as smooth as the swoop of an eagle, a single, circular motion which drops my hands and raises my guns. I was in rare form that night, and it was well that it was so, for there was between the roar of my own guns and the flash of Pedro Murietta's gun only that split fraction of a second which cannot be registered by the ear.

I shot him in the forehead. I needed to jerk that head back with my heavy slug. I had known that it would be close. His bullet whizzed over the top of my head, and in the three reports there mingled another. Knowing that Black Barr would never overlook one who had shot at him from ambush, the man with the bandaged shoulder had taken advantage of Pedro's arising to work his concealed, left hand under the table, and to take up a gun from his holster. He had partly turned, and had shot from his hip, but the bullet had grazed my side.

I have a reputation for fast firing, but that night as I emptied one of my guns into the man's body the reports sounded like one continuous roar.

Before the body of Pedro Murietta had pitched to the floor I had emptied one of my guns into the body of the man with the bandaged shoulder. The roar of my guns had brought about the desired effect. All about me were raised hands, white faces.

"Black Barr has come to stay for a while," I told them. "I have a good memory for faces. If I ever see one of you again I shall shoot on sight. I shall be here tomorrow. Good night!"

With the words I left the house and returned to the machine. Sitting there, with white, anxious face, was the girl.

"Oh thank God you have come!" she said. "When I heard the firing. . . . Oh, if you had been killed I should have died!"

From the ranch house there came the figure of a running man, and I threw down my gun upon him.

He held his hands high in the air, and ran before the lights of the machine, an excellent move. He had brains, this cowpuncher who had first recognized me and who had held his hands high in the air while the shooting was taking place in the ranch house.

"Wait," he called, "wait . . . Bill Purdy has made a complete confession, a confession which the Justice of the Peace has taken down. He wants to see you before he dies."

I thought for a moment. I could hardly afford to leave the girl alone now that men would shortly be pouring out from the bunkhouse. I could not well take her into that room with me and leave the machine unattended, and then there was the excellent chance that the whole thing was a trap. We did not need the confession of Bill Purdy. Bah! This death-bed confession stuff makes me sick. This business of a villain who is dying sobbing out the story of what he has done and then asking to be forgiven. It is a cry-baby stunt. Here was Bill Purdy, robber of women, bully, gun-fighter, murderer, dying, and he wanted to die with a clean slate, with a confession and forgiveness. . . . Oh well, perhaps I might as well humor him.

I turned to get out of the machine, and then I saw the light glint upon the girl's bare shoulder. There were the livid marks of fingers where Bill Purdy had grabbed her to make her submit to his will.

I turned back in the seat and reached for the gear shift.

"I am not coming. I can't leave the girl," I told the man, shortly.

"What shall I tell Bill Purdy?" he asked.

I thought of those livid marks again, thought of Bill Purdy dying.

"Tell him to go to hell," I told the man, as I slammed the gear lever in and eased in the clutch.

BIG NEWS!!!

In the next issue—November—we begin the publication of the greatest adventure stories ever written—

The Adventures of Capt. Kettle

By Cutcliffe Hyne

Captain Kettle is Master of a small tramp freight steamer whose owners send her to the out-of-the-way corners of the world on one dangerous voyage after another—gun running, pearling, and the like.

Kettle is a runty little Scotsman, whose soul is filled with religion and whose heart is filled with red-blooded courage. He is a devil in a fight, equally handy with fists, knife or gun, and fighting of all kinds constitutes the larger part of his life. He's never out of trouble more than a few days at a time from January to January; and his adventures are the kind that will hold you spell-bound to the last word.

These stories were first published nearly 30 years ago. They immediately became known throughout the English speaking world, and are today considered by thousands of people the greatest adventure stories ever written in any language. Thirty years is a long time: not many Black Mask readers are old enough to have read these stories. It gives us the greatest pleasure to be able to reprint them now, for our readers' enjoyment

The MAN EATERS of TSAVO



By **Lieut. Col. J.H. PATTERSON D.S.O.**

"The Man-Eaters of Tsavo" has long been known as the most thrilling true adventure yarn ever written. Since its publication, about twenty years ago, twenty-five editions have been printed. The story describes the author's adventures in combatting ferocious man-eating lions which completely held up the construction of a railroad in Africa. The reign of terror brought on by these beasts has never been equalled anywhere in fiction—and every word of the following tale is absolutely true. The first instalment of the most hair-raising tale of a generation starts below. Read it and we guarantee you won't miss another issue of *Black Mask* until it is finished.

IT was toward noon on March 1, 1898, that I first found myself entering the narrow and somewhat dangerous harbor of Mombasa, on the east coast of Africa. My object at this time was to take up a position to which I had been appointed by the Foreign Office on the construction staff of the Uganda Railway.

I had spent nearly a week in Mombasa, and was becoming very anxious to get my marching orders, when one morning I was delighted to receive an official letter instructing me to proceed to Tsavo, about 132 miles from the coast, and to take charge of the construction of the section of the line at

that place, which had just then been reached by rail-head. I accordingly started at daylight next morning in a special train with Mr. Anderson, the Superintendent of Works, and Dr. McCulloch, the principal Medical Officer; and as the country was in every way new to me, I found the journey a most interesting one.

Game was more or less plentiful, but the animals were very difficult to see, owing to the thick undergrowth in which they hid themselves. We managed, however, to catch sight of a few from the carriage windows, and also noticed some of the natives, the Wa Nyika, or "children of the wilderness."

As our train sped onward through the level uplands, we saw a fine ostrich striding along parallel with the line, as if having a race with us. Dr. McCulloch at once seized his rifle and by a lucky shot brought down the huge bird; the next and greater difficulty, however, was to secure the prize. For a time the engine-driver took no notice of our signals and shouts, but at last we succeeded in attracting his attention, and the train was shunted back to where the ostrich had fallen. We found it to be an exceptionally fine specimen, and had to exert all our strength to drag it on board the train.

Toward dusk we arrived at our destination, Tsavo. I slept that night in a little palm hut which had been built by some previous traveler, and which was fortunately unoccupied for the time being. It was rather broken-down and dilapidated, not even possessing a door, and as I lay on my narrow camp bed I could see the stars twinkling through the roof. I little knew then what adventures awaited me in this neighborhood; and if I had realized that at that very time two savage brutes were prowling round, seeking whom they might devour, I hardly think I should have slept so peacefully in my rickety shelter.

Next morning I was up betimes, eager to make acquaintance with my new surroundings. My first impression on coming out of my hut was that I was hemmed in on all sides by a dense growth of impenetrable jungle; and on scrambling to the top of a little hill close at hand, I found that the whole country as far as I could see was covered with low, stunted trees, thick undergrowth and "wait-a-bit" thorns. The only clearing, indeed, appeared to be where the narrow track for the railway had been cut.

This interminable *nyika*, or wilderness of whitish and leafless dwarf trees, presented a ghastly and sun-stricken appearance; and here and there a ridge of dark-red heat-blistered rock jutted

out above the jungle, and added, by its rugged barrenness, to the dreariness of the picture. Away to the northeast stretched the unbroken line of the N'dungu Escarpment, while far off to the south I could just catch a glimpse of the snow-capped top of towering Kilima N'jaro.

The one redeeming feature of the neighborhood was the river from which Tsavo takes its name. This is a swiftly flowing stream, always cool and always running, the latter being an exceptional attribute in this part of East Africa; and the fringe of lofty green trees along its banks formed a welcome relief to the general monotony of the landscape.

When I had thus obtained a rough idea of the neighborhood, I returned to my hut, and began in earnest to make preparations for my stay in this out-of-the-way place. The stores were unpacked, and my "boys" pitched my tent in a little clearing close to where I had slept the night before and not far from the main camp of the workmen.

Rail-head had at this time just reached the western side of the river, and some thousands of Indian coolies and other workmen were encamped there. As the line had to be pushed on with all speed, a diversion had been made and the river crossed by means of a temporary bridge. My principal work was to erect the permanent structure, and to complete all the other works for a distance of thirty miles on each side of Tsavo. In a short time workmen and supplies came pouring in, and the noise of hammers and sledges, drilling and blasting, echoed merrily through the district.

II

UNFORTUNATELY this happy state of affairs did not continue for long, and our work was soon interrupted in a rude and startling manner. Two most voracious and insatiable man-eating lions appeared upon the scene, and for over nine months waged an intermittent warfare against the railway

and all those connected with it in the vicinity of Tsavo. This culminated in a perfect reign of terror in December, 1898, when they actually succeeded in bringing the railway works to a complete standstill for about three weeks.

At first they were not always successful in their efforts to carry off a victim, but as time went on they stopped at nothing and indeed braved any danger in order to obtain their favorite food. Their methods then became so uncanny and their man-stalking so well-timed and so certain of success, that the workmen firmly believed that they were not real animals at all, but devils in lions' shapes. Many a time the coolies solemnly assured me that it was absolutely useless to attempt to shoot them. They were quite convinced that the angry spirits of two departed native chiefs had taken this form in order to protest against a railway being made through their country, and by stopping its progress to avenge the insult thus shown to them.

I had only been a few days at Tsavo when I first heard that these brutes had been seen in the neighborhood. Shortly afterward one or two coolies mysteriously disappeared, and I was told that they had been carried off by night from their tents and devoured by lions. At the time I did not credit this story, and was more inclined to believe that the unfortunate men had been the victims of foul play at the hands of some of their comrades. They were, as it happened, very good workmen, and had each saved a fair number of rupees, so I thought it quite likely that some scoundrels from the gangs had murdered them for the sake of their money.

This suspicion, however, was very soon dispelled. About three weeks after my arrival, I was roused one morning about daybreak and told that one of my *jemadars*, a fine powerful Sikh named Ungan Singh, had been seized in his tent during the night, and dragged off and eaten.

I lost no time in making an examina-

tion of the place, and was soon convinced that the man had indeed been carried off by a lion, as its "pug" marks were plainly visible in the sand, while the furrows made by the heels of the victim showed the direction in which he had been dragged away. Moreover, the *jemadar* shared his tent with half a dozen other workmen, and one of his bedfellows had actually witnessed the occurrence. He graphically described how, at about midnight, the lion suddenly put its head in at the open tent door and seized Ungan Singh—who happened to be nearest the opening—by the throat.

The unfortunate fellow cried out "*Choro*" ("Let go"), and threw his arms up round the lion's neck. The next moment he was gone, and his panic-stricken companions lay helpless, forced to listen to the terrible struggle which took place outside. Poor Ungan Singh must have died hard; but what chance had he? As a coolie gravely remarked, "Was he not fighting a lion?"

On hearing this dreadful story, I at once set out to try to track the animal and was accompanied by Captain Haslem, who happened to be staying at Tsavo at the time, and who, poor fellow, himself met with a tragic fate very shortly afterward. We found it an easy matter to follow the route taken by the lion, as he appeared to have stopped several times before beginning his meal. Pools of blood marked these halting-places, where he doubtless indulged in the man-eater's habit of licking the skin off so as to get at the fresh blood. (I have been led to believe that this is their custom from the appearance of two half-eaten bodies which I subsequently rescued; the skin was gone in places, and the flesh looked dry, as if it had been sucked.)

On reaching the spot where the body had been devoured, a dreadful spectacle presented itself. The ground all round was covered with blood and morsels of flesh and bones, but the unfortunate *jemadar's* head had been left intact,

save for the holes made by the lion's tusks on seizing him, and lay a short distance away from the other remains, the eyes staring wide open with a startled, horrified look in them. The place was considerably cut up, and on closer examination we found that two lions had been there and had probably struggled for possession of the body. It was the most gruesome sight I had ever seen.

We collected the remains as well as we could and heaped stones on them, the head with its fixed, terrified stare seeming to watch us all the time, for it we did not bury, but took back to camp for identification before the Medical Officer.

Thus occurred my first experience of man-eating lions, and I vowed there and then that I would spare no pains to rid the neighborhood of the brutes. I little knew the trouble that was in store for me, or how narrow were to be my own escapes from sharing poor Ugan Singh's fate.

That same night I sat up in a tree close to the late *jemadar's* tent, hoping that the lions would return to it for another victim. I was followed to my perch by a few of the more terrified coolies, who begged to be allowed to sit up in the tree with me; all the other workmen remained in their tents, but no more doors were left open. I had with me my .303 and a 12-bore shotgun, one barrel loaded with ball and the other with slug.

Shortly after setting down to my vigil, my hopes of bagging one of the brutes were raised by the sound of their ominous roaring coming closer and closer. Presently this ceased, and quiet reigned for an hour or two, as lions always stalk their prey in complete silence. All at once, however, we heard a great uproar and frenzied cries coming from another camp about half a mile away; we knew then that the lions had seized a victim there, and that we should see or hear nothing further of them that night.

Next morning I found that one of the brutes had broken into a tent at Railhead Camp—whence we had heard the commotion during the night—and had made off with a poor wretch who was lying there asleep. After a night's rest, therefore, I took up my position in a suitable tree near this tent. I did not at all like the idea of walking the half-mile to the place after dark, but all the same I felt fairly safe, as one of my men carried a bright lamp close behind me. He in his turn was followed by another leading a goat, which I tied under my tree in hope that the lion might be tempted to seize it instead of a coolie.

A steady drizzle commenced shortly after I had settled down to my night of watching, and I was soon thoroughly chilled and wet. I stuck to my uncomfortable post, however, hoping to get a shot, but I well remember the feeling of impotent disappointment I experienced when about midnight I heard screams and cries and a heart-rending shriek, which told me that the man-eaters had again eluded me and had claimed another victim elsewhere.

At this time the various camps for the workmen were very scattered, so that the lions had a range of some eight miles on either side of Tsavo to work upon; and as their tactics seemed to be to break into a different camp each night, it was most difficult to forestall them. They almost appeared, too, to have an extraordinary and uncanny faculty of finding out our plans beforehand, so that no matter in how likely or how tempting a spot we lay in wait for them, they invariably avoided that particular place and seized their victim for the night from some other camp.

Hunting them by day, moreover, in such a dense wilderness as surrounded us, was an exceedingly tiring and really foolhardy undertaking. In a thick jungle of the kind round Tsavo, the hunted animal has every chance against the hunter, as however careful the latter may be, a dead twig or something of

the sort is sure to crackle just at the critical moment and so give the alarm. Still I never gave up hope of some day finding their lair, and accordingly continued to devote all my spare time to crawling about through the undergrowth.

Many a time when attempting to force my way through this bewildering tangle I had to be released by my gun-bearer from the fast clutches of the "wait-a-bit"; and often with immense pains I succeeded in tracing the lions to the river after they had seized a victim, only to lose the trail from there onward, owing to the rocky nature of the ground which they seemed to be careful to choose in retreating to their den.

At this early stage of the struggle, I am glad to say, the lions were not always successful in their efforts to capture a human being for their nightly meal, and one or two amusing incidents occurred to relieve the tension from which our nerves were beginning to suffer. On one occasion an enterprising *bunniah* (Indian trader) was riding along on his donkey late one night, when suddenly a lion sprang out on him, knocking over both man and beast. The donkey was badly wounded, and the lion was just about to seize the trader, when in some way or other his claws became entangled in a rope by which two empty oil tins were strung across the donkey's neck. The rattle and clatter made by these as he dragged them after him gave him such a fright that he turned tail and bolted off into the jungle, to the intense relief of the terrified *bunniah*, who quickly made his way up the nearest tree and remained there, shivering with fear, for the rest of the night.

Shortly after this episode, a Greek contractor named Themistocles Pappadimitrini had an equally marvelous escape. He was sleeping peacefully in his tent one night, when a lion broke in, and seized and made off with the mattress on which he was lying. Though rudely awakened the Greek was

quite unhurt and suffered from nothing worse than a bad fright.

This same man, however, met with a melancholy fate not long afterward. He had been to the Kilima N'jaro district to buy cattle, and on the return journey attempted to take a short cut across country to the railway, but perished miserably of thirst on the way.

On another occasion fourteen coolies who slept together in a large tent were one night awakened by a lion suddenly jumping onto the tent and breaking through it. The brute landed with one claw on a coolie's shoulder, which was badly torn; but instead of seizing the man himself, in his hurry he grabbed a large bag of rice which happened to be lying in the tent, and made off with it, dropping it in disgust some little distance away when he realized his mistake.

These, however, were only the earlier efforts of the man-eaters. Later on, as will be seen, nothing flurried or frightened them in the least, and except as food they showed a complete contempt for human beings. Having once marked down a victim, they would allow nothing to deter them from securing him, whether he were protected by a thick fence, or inside a closed tent, or sitting round a brightly burning fire. Shots, shouting and firebrands they alike held in derision.

III

ALL this time my own tent was pitched in an open clearing, unprotected by a fence of any kind round it. One night when the medical officer, Dr. Rose, was staying with me, we were awakened about midnight by hearing something tumbling about among the tent ropes, but on going out with a lantern we could discover nothing. Daylight, however, plainly revealed the "pug" marks of a lion, so that on that occasion I fancy one or other of us had a narrow escape.

Warned by this experience, I at once arranged to move my quarters, and

went to join forces with Dr. Brock, who had just arrived at Tsavo to take medical charge of the district. We shared a hut of palm leaves and boughs, which we had constructed on the eastern side of the river, close to the old caravan route leading to Uganda; and we had it surrounded by a circular *boma*, or thorn fence, about seventy yards in diameter, well made and thick and high. Our personal servants also lived within the enclosure, and a bright fire was always kept up throughout the night.

For the sake of coolness, Brock and I used to sit out under the veranda of this hut in the evenings; but it was rather trying to our nerves to attempt to read or write there, as we never knew when a lion might spring over the *boma*, and be on us before we were aware. We therefore kept our rifles within easy reach, and cast many an anxious glance out into the inky darkness beyond the circle of the firelight. On one or two occasions we found in the morning that the lions had come quite close to the fence; but, fortunately, they never succeeded in getting through.

By this time, too, the camps of the workmen had also been surrounded by thorn fences; nevertheless the lions managed to jump over or to break through some one or other of these, and regularly every few nights a man was carried off, the reports of the disappearance of this or that workman coming in to me with painful frequency. So long, however, as Railhead Camp—with its two or three thousand men, scattered over a wide area—remained at Tsavo, the coolies appeared not to take much notice of the dreadful deaths of their comrades. Each man felt, I suppose, that as the man-eaters had such a large number of victims to choose from, the chances of their selecting him in particular were very small.

But when the large camp moved ahead with the railway, matters altered considerably. I was then left with only some few hundred men to complete the permanent works; and as all the remain-

ing workmen were naturally camped together, the attentions of the lions became more apparent and made a deeper impression. A regular panic consequently ensued, and it required all my powers of persuasion to induce the men to stay on. In fact, I succeeded in doing so only by allowing them to knock off all regular work until they had built exceptionally thick and high *bomas* round each camp.

Within these enclosures fires were kept burning all night, and it was also the duty of the night-watchman to keep clattering half a dozen empty oil tins suspended from a convenient tree. These he manipulated by means of a long rope, while sitting in safety within his tent; and the frightful noise thus produced was kept up at frequent intervals during the night in the hopes of terrifying away the man-eaters. In spite of all these precautions, however, the lions would not be denied, and men continued to disappear.

When the rail-head workmen moved on, their hospital camp was left behind. It stood rather apart from the other camps, in a clearing about three-quarters of a mile from my hut, but was protected by a good thick fence and to all appearance was quite secure. It seemed, however, as if barriers were of no avail against the "demons," for before very long one of them found a weak spot in the *boma* and broke through.

On this occasion the Hospital Assistant had a marvelous escape. Hearing a noise outside, he opened the door of his tent and was horrified to see a great lion standing a few yards away, looking at him. The beast made a spring toward him, which gave the Assistant such a fright that he jumped backward and in doing so luckily upset a box containing medical stores.

This crashed down with such a loud clatter of breaking glass that the lion was startled for the moment and made off to another part of the enclosure. Here, unfortunately, he was more successful, as he jumped on to and broke

through a tent in which eight patients were lying. Two of them were badly wounded by his spring, while a third poor wretch was seized and dragged off bodily through the thorn fence.

The two wounded coolies were left where they lay, a piece of torn tent having fallen over them; and in this position the doctor and I found them on our arrival soon after dawn next morning. We at once decided to move the hospital closer to the main camp; a fresh site was prepared, a stout hedge built round the enclosure, and all the patients were moved in before nightfall.

As I had heard that lions generally visit recently deserted camps, I decided to sit up all night in the vacated *boma* in the hope of getting an opportunity of bagging one of them; but in the middle of my lonely vigil I had the mortification of hearing shrieks and cries coming from the direction of the new hospital, telling me only too plainly that our dreaded foes had once more eluded me. Hurrying to the place at daylight, I found that one of the lions had jumped over the newly erected fence and had carried off the hospital *bhisti* (water-carrier) and that several other coolies had been unwilling witnesses of the terrible scene which took place within the circle of light given by the big camp fire.

The *bhisti*, it appears, had been lying on the floor with his head toward the center of the tent and his feet nearly touching the side. The lion managed to get its head in below the canvas, seized him by the foot and pulled him out. In desperation the unfortunate water-carrier clutched hold of a heavy box in a vain attempt to prevent himself being carried off, and dragged it with him until he was forced to let go by its being stopped by the side of the tent. He then caught hold of a tent rope, and clung tightly to it until it broke.

As soon as the lion managed to get him clear of the tent, he sprang at his throat and after a few vigorous shakes

the poor *bhisti's* agonizing cries were silenced forever. The brute then seized him in his mouth, like a huge cat with a mouse, and ran up and down the *boma* looking for a weak spot to break through. This he presently found and plunged into, dragging his victim with him and leaving shreds of torn cloth and flesh as ghastly evidences of his passage through the thorns.

Dr. Brock and I were easily able to follow his tracks, and soon found the remains about four hundred yards away in the bush. There was the usual horrible sight. Very little was left of the unfortunate *bhisti*—only the skull, the jaws, a few of the larger bones and a portion of the palm with one or two fingers attached. On one of these was a silver ring, and this, with the teeth (a relic much prized by certain castes), was sent to the man's widow in India.

Again it was decided to move the hospital; and again, before nightfall, the work was completed, including a still stronger and thicker *boma*. When the patients had been moved, I had a covered goods-wagon placed in a favorable position on a siding which ran close to the site which had just been abandoned, and in this Brock and I arranged to sit up that night. We left a couple of tents still standing within the enclosure, and also tied up a few cattle in it as bait for the lions, which had been seen in no less than three different places in the neighborhood during the afternoon (April 23).

Four miles from Tsavo they had attempted to seize a coolie who was walking along the line. Fortunately, however, he had just time to escape up a tree, where he remained more dead than alive, until he was rescued by the Traffic Manager, who caught sight of him from a passing train. They next appeared close to Tsavo Station, and a couple of hours later some workmen saw one of the lions stalking Dr. Brock as he was returning about dusk from the hospital.

In accordance with our plan, the doctor and I set out after dinner for the

goods-wagon, which was about a mile away from our hut. In the light of subsequent events, we did a very foolish thing in taking up our position so late; nevertheless, we reached our destination in safety, and settled down to our watch about ten o'clock. We had the lower half of the door of the wagon closed, while the upper half was left wide open for observation; and we faced, of course, in the direction of the abandoned *boma*, which, however, we were unable to see in the inky darkness.

For an hour or two everything was quiet, and the deadly silence was becoming very monotonous and oppressive, when suddenly, to our right, a dry twig snapped, and we knew that an animal of some sort was about. Soon afterward we heard a dull thud, as if some heavy body had jumped over the *boma*. The cattle, too, became very uneasy, and we could hear them moving about restlessly. Then again came dead silence.

At this juncture I proposed to my companion that I should get out of the wagon and lie down on the ground close to it, as I could see better in that position should the lion come in our direction with his prey. Brock, however, persuaded me to remain where I was; and a few seconds afterward I was heartily glad that I had taken his advice, for at that very moment one of the man-eaters—although we did not know it—was quietly stalking us, and was even then almost within springing distance.

Orders had been given for the entrance to the *boma* to be blocked up, and accordingly we were listening in the expectation of hearing the lion force his way out through the bushes with his prey. As a matter of fact, however,

the doorway had not been properly closed, and while we were wondering what the lion could be doing inside the *boma* for so long, he was outside all the time, silently reconnoitering our position.

Presently I fancied I saw something coming very stealthily toward us. I feared, however, to trust my eyes, which by that time were strained by prolonged staring through the darkness, so under my breath I asked Brock whether he saw anything, at the same time covering the dark object as well as I could with my rifle. Brock did not answer; he told me afterward that he, too, thought he had seen something move, but was afraid to say so lest I should fire and it turn out to be nothing after all.

After this there was intense silence again for a second or two, then with a sudden bound a huge body sprang at us. "The lion!" I shouted, and we both fired almost simultaneously—not a moment too soon, for in another second the brute would assuredly have landed inside the wagon. As it was, he must have swerved off in his spring, probably blinded by the flash and frightened by the noise of the double report which was increased a hundredfold by the reverberation of the hollow iron roof of the truck.

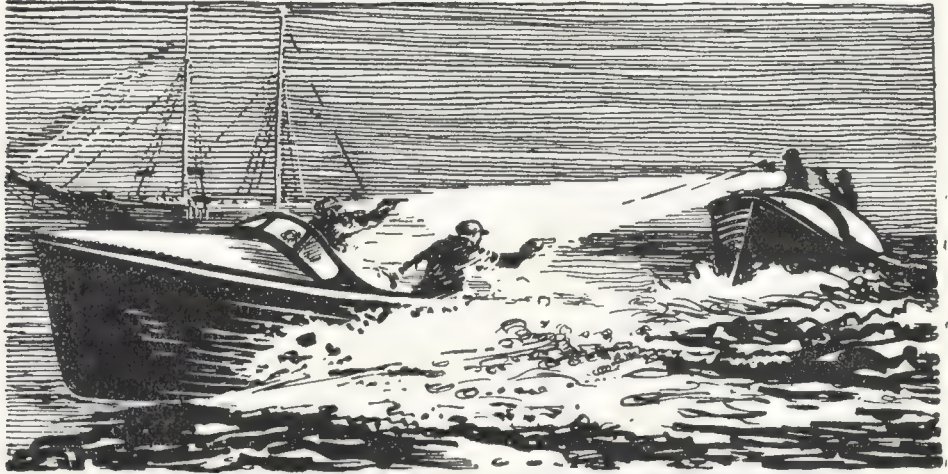
•Had we not been very much on the alert, he would undoubtedly have got one of us, and we realized that we had had a very lucky and very narrow escape. The next morning we found Brock's bullet embedded in the sand close to a footprint; it could not have missed the lion by more than an inch or two. Mine was nowhere to be found.

Thus ended my first direct encounter with one of the man-eaters.

(Reprinted by arrangement with The Macmillan Company, of New York, and Macmillan and Company, Ltd., of London.)

(To be continued)

FULL SPEED AHEAD



BY DONALD MAC GREGOR

SHE didn't start acting fly until after she'd passed; otherwise I'd have been in action quick. But she just looked like any other good motor boat and there wasn't any reason I should be leary.

I'd been forward in the *Dauntless* with Bradley all the way across the river, and we'd heard her coming even before she rounded the bend. It wasn't till later that I got the idea she gave us a rather wide berth. All the time I was thinking how pretty she was instead of what she might be up to.

I know something about motor boats, understand, and I had to admire this one. She was a beauty, all right, and built for speed. Her paint job was dark, and she was low and close to the water and able to do thirty-six or I'm a poor simp, which I think sometimes I am, considering the space required for me to take the tumble.

Of course, after admiring her beauty, I wondered a little. My ten years in the harbor as the founder and proprietor—pardon me—of the Tex Robbins Agency, which I'd built up from nothing but an idea of protecting decent business from dock and ship crooks had put me in that frame of mind. I always

make it my rule to try and know the other fellow and what he's about.

It wasn't till she got passed us five hundred yards or more that she turned off her lights and started to speed. We tried to get her with the spotlight, but couldn't very well. And I couldn't figure just why she turned the lights off and started to speed, unless it was that we straightened our course with the *Dauntless* so we could pull up at the landing which was directly opposite.

Which was what made me think that those aboard her knew who I was.

What I should have done was to follow her, and I believe I would if it hadn't been for Bradley. And I should have known better than to let him throw me off the way I did. The things he don't tumble to would fill a library, although you've got to expect that from a bird who's more of a mechanic than an operative.

"Rum runner" is what he said as the chug-chug-chug got fainter.

Which was what I hadn't thought of at all.

"Maybe," said I, "and maybe not."

"Sure," said he in that over-confident way he had. And with that he turned off the searchlight which we'd been try-

ing to put on her. She was out of range anyhow.

"Don't be a sap," said I.

But Bradley persisted.

"They're gettin' fast ones now," said he. "They got to, the way th' coast guard's workin'."

"That's just why I don't think she is," said I.

"How's that?" said he.

"Well, in the first place," said I, "she's too expensive a boat to take chances with. The way the Coast Guard's workin', they get one boat out of five. Lose a cheap one, which none of these birds want to do, and you don't lose much. But lose a good one and you're done for."

"They's a lot of dough tied up in this liquor thing," said he.

"Don't I know there is?" said I. "But that ain't the dope in this case. That boat's headed for the open sea. If she had liquor aboard, she'd be headed in, not out. She's up to something, all right, but it ain't liquor. Her running without lights is what makes me leary of her."

And as I was talking I was watching her off in the distance. If the *Dauntless* had had more speed, I'd have followed, but by then it wasn't any use. She had too much of a start.

So we kept going on in toward the dock and finally that mysterious motor boat went out of sight. Looking back now, I see how I should have followed. It was some time later, though, before I got the hookup with what was in store for me.

I DIDN'T wait for Bradley. I hopped out on the cement and let him tie the *Dauntless* up himself, which he always did anyhow. He always slept aboard her, to be ready for emergency.

I went up the steps two jumps at a time, for I was a little late. By which I don't mean that it made any difference. A fellow can run his own affairs as he sees fit to do. But I told Douglass I'd

be back at twelve and here it was almost one.

"Howdy?" said I, as I flipped my spring overcoat over the back of a chair. "Anything up?"

Douglass turned around and dragged at his pipe, which was a way he had. Ever since I'd known him, eight years, he always took a puff and let out smoke before he started to talk. He and the pipe were like Barnum & Bailey, ice cream and cake, or peaches and cream, always together.

"They was a bird in here to see you," said he behind his cloud of smoke. "He couldn't wait, though, and he beat it."

"Who was it?" I asked.

"I wrote his name down," said Bradley as he took another puff at the pipe, meantime picking up a pad from the table. "Here it is. He said his name was L. Robertson."

"Lloyd Robertson?" I repeated. "That guy who's the head of the Oceanic Insurance Company?"

"That's him," Douglass continued. "He hung around here about an hour, but finally he had to leave. He left word that when you came in you was to get in touch with him."

"Where?"

"At his hotel."

"Tonight?"

"Yea," Douglass continued. "He says it was important."

"What hotel is he at?"

"The International."

Naturally I couldn't blame him for not wanting to talk on the telephone. Folks with business like he had can't ever tell who's listening in. Which was why I agreed to stop by his hotel on the way uptown, even though it was late.

Up in his room half an hour later I found a tall, rangy, red-faced Englishman with a dialect. And he got right down to business.

"So mighty good of you to bother coming around tonight," he began. "I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't important."

"I'm sorry I missed you at the office," said I.

"Quite all right, quite all right," said he. "What I want you for is to guard a shipment of merchandise. We're the victims of a gang of silk thieves."

"Your insurance company?" I asked, puzzled.

"No," he replied, "one of our clients. Of course we are indirectly. We pay the losses. It's the Far East Trading Company."

"Have you had some losses?"

"Yes," he said, "up to date they've been \$60,000."

"Stolen silk?"

"Raw silk, in bales. I suppose you know—raw silk comes in bales that weigh about 145 pounds apiece, and that each is worth \$1,000."

"Yes," I answered, "I understand that."

Robertson lighted a cigar.

"Do you know Thompson?" he asked. "He's manager of the Far East Company."

"I met him once," I said, recalling the little bald-headed man who'd turned me down once when I went to solicit his business.

"Thompson and I talked it over," Robertson explained, "and decided to get you in on the case. The Far East Company will pay your bill, but I'll guarantee it."

"OK," I answered. "Let's get down to business. When did you lose the silk?"

"There were two robberies," he explained. "One was about two months ago. The other was a month ago."

"How does it come you didn't call me before?"

"Thompson reported it to the police," he said, "but they didn't make any headway. There weren't any clues at all, it seems. A gang swooped down on the watchmen and bound and gagged them. The robberies happened late at night and the watchmen weren't able to give any descriptions."

"Where did the robberies occur? At the Far East docks?"

"Yes, Docks C and D. You see the main point is this: This is the heavy shipping season and a lot of silk is on its way in. They're getting six thousand bales in within a week—one shipment of three thousand bales tomorrow and another next week of three thousand more."

"Is it coming in by water?"

"No, overland from 'Frisco. It's to be stored, though, at Docks C and D and redistributed by water to plants in this general section—coastwise ships. When it all gets here there'll be \$7,000,000 worth of silk on hand—\$6,000,000 worth coming in and \$1,000,000 in stock. That's too much to take chances with. And that's where you come in."

I lighted a cigar and there was a pause.

"I'd like to go over to the docks and take a look around," I said. "How about going over now, or do you think it's too late?"

"It's almost two," said he as he looked at his watch. "Suppose we make it tomorrow morning at nine?"

"All right, then, tomorrow morning at nine."

Which is why we didn't get mixed in the thing which probably was going on while we were talking. If we'd have gone over to those docks when I was speaking it's dollars to doughnuts we'd have come in for some gun play. But of course we didn't know what had happened until we got there.

THE *Dauntless* hadn't more than pulled up to the dock landing, when I figured something was wrong. I could see Thompson was agitated.

"Well," Thompson said, by way of a beginning, as he twitched his shoulders nervously, "they pulled it again!"

"What?" Robertson exclaimed. "Another robbery?"

"Thirty bales," said Thompson as he shook his gray head.

"Thirty thousand more!"

"Yes," Thompson continued. "I had two watchmen on duty in Dock C—Riley and Jones. It was shortly after midnight, I guess, when a bunch of guys sneaked up behind them and bound and gagged them. We figure the robbers were hidden in the warehouse, so there wasn't any noise of opening or closing doors."

I spent my time listening until I got the straight of it, and then I put a few questions to Thompson.

"This is the third robbery," said I.

"Yes," he replied.

"How much did they get the first time?"

"Thirty bales."

"And the second time?"

"Thirty bales."

"And now thirty bales again."

"Yes."

"What do the police say about it?" I asked.

Thompson hesitated.

"You had it up with them, didn't you?" I added.

"Oh, yes," came the answer. "But they weren't able to turn up anything."

"I see," said I.

FOUR of the twelve birds I hired had done plenty of time and the others had pasts that were shady enough. They were friends of mine, just the same, and I was ready to bet a hundred bucks to a nickel they'd do the right thing. By giving them jobs when jobs came along I was doing my bit toward keeping them straight.

They were all pretty handy with guns. That had been part of their A. B. C.'s. The time most people had spent getting a line on higher mathematics they'd spent at target practice. I kept a line on them for just such an occasion as this.

With that guard around I was pretty sure there wouldn't be another hold-up on docks C and D. To have put the works to that layout would have taken just twice as many.

Thompson and Robertson had said

they wanted a guard and a guard I gave them. So with all that set, I had the time to study out who might have been in on the robbery.

I couldn't see where it took so much detective skill. It looked like an open and shut affair to me, which isn't saying exactly that I could step out and put my fingers on the gang. Which, of course, I couldn't. But the more I thought, I thought of the motor boat.

I figured I'd trip out and discover where the robbers had disposed of the silk. It was dollars to doughnuts they had disposed of it. Sixty days is a long time for such an outfit to wait for the cash. Then, too, why were they coming back for more if they hadn't found some sort of a fence?

Thompson gave me a look at the Far East books, which was the first step in my program. He gave me a list of the firms that bought silk, about twenty in all. So I went back to the office and sent out four men to those plants to see where they were buying and if any new sources had sprung up in the last sixty days. I asked these birds to get a list of all purchases. Rounding these firms up, I figured, would take a couple of days, by which time I'd be able to do a little snooping around on my own account. Where that motor boat put up was what I was after.

Thompson was as busy as a hen with a brood of new chicks getting in the new shipment. As soon as it arrived on the cars he hired a gang to put it into the warehouses. When it was all in place that meant about \$4,000,000 worth of silk, which is a handy sum to have around the house. Still, it was safe all right, with those guards of mine, which I told Thompson and to which he agreed.

"It won't be here long," he said to me. "We got a lot of orders and I'm shipping out as fast as I can. We ought to be pretty well clear when the next lot gets in next week."

"You're loading here at the docks?" I asked.

"Sure," said he. "As much as we can. Sometimes you can't always get a ship to come up, though, and so we send the silk out on a lighter. We're figuring on sending out a hundred and fifty bales that way tonight."

"Where's it going?" I asked.

"Aboard the *General Logan*," said he, "to Millersville."

"Where is the *General Logan*?"

"About a mile down the river."

"Kind of risky, ain't it?" said I, "sending silk a mile on a lighter?"

"We often do that," Thompson replied. "It ain't takin' much of a chance. A tug goes down with the lighter and they load to the ship."

"How about putting a guard on the lighter?" I asked.

"That ain't necessary," Thompson argued. "What I'm worried about is the warehouse."

Which was all there was to that until later.

And I devoted the afternoon and evening to looking for the mysterious motor boat, which was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Still, I figured, there might be somebody who'd seen her, particularly among the dock police, the Coast Guard, the customs outfit or the immigration officials.

But it wasn't any use. None of them had. So along about midnight I knocked off, went home and hit the hay.

I FOUND out later, when I looked at my watch, that it was six-fifteen when the telephone rang. I was so dead to the world that it took a couple of minutes for me to get my bearings. Wide awake, then, I had a hunch that something had happened.

Douglass was on the phone. I could tell by the shake of his voice that he was excited. And I hardly could blame him. A sudden gust of wind through the window would have blown me over, too.

"They—they stole the lighter," he was saying.

"The what?" said I, just barely able to understand.

"The lighter," he repeated. "The lighter with the silk aboard."

Really, if Douglass hadn't always been such a serious bird I'd have thought he was joshing. I was so surprised I hardly was able to speak. I guess Douglass realized that, for he continued:

"We got the report through the Coast Guard."

And there he stopped again, as if that cinched the story.

"What's the Coast Guard got to do about it?" I demanded.

"They picked up the tug."

"The tug?" I asked. "I thought you said it was the lighter."

"I did say the lighter," he continued. "Think you'd better come to the office, so I can explain. There's \$150,000 worth of silk missing."

"All right," said I. "I'll be right down."

It didn't take me much time to dress or get breakfast. You'd have thought I was a fireman on an early call. I didn't care much about the speed cops, either, with the gas on all the way. I could see I was going to have a busy day, which wasn't a wrong guess. I had a busy day, all right, and a busy night, too.

Douglass was on the telephone when I pounded into the office. I tried to signal him to stop talking, but he signaled back that he couldn't. So I waited.

By and by I gathered he had the Coast Guard on the line and was getting what there was new to the story. Instead of butting in, consequently, I hung alongside and listened. In a general way, with only one side of the conversation to go on, I gathered that one of the Coast Guard cutters was on its way into port with a tug. All of which I cleared up as soon as Douglass finished talking and turned to me.

"What happened?" I demanded excitedly.

"Now listen," he began, "and I'll tell you the whole story. You know about that lighter loaded with silk, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Sure."

"Well," he said, "they got it loaded about midnight and a tug they'd hired came along and took it away. The plan was to take the lighter to the steamer."

"Yes, I know about that."

"Well," Douglass resumed, "it seems that the trip hadn't much more than started when another tug came along—river bandits, it seems."

"Yes."

"Well, the guys jumped from the second tug onto the first and bound and gagged the crew. Then they wrecked the machinery and set the tug adrift, making off with the lighter themselves."

"And the Coast Guard picked up the disabled tug?"

"Yes, that was the way."

"Any trace of the tug and the lighter—the second tug, I mean?"

"Not that I've heard of," said Douglass. "I notified the police, but they didn't see it so far."

Which was what they hadn't. I got them on the wire and, after explaining what it was all about, went to the docks station and talked with the lieutenant.

I hadn't much more than put him wise to the whole business when the telephone jingled. He answered and, talking a minute, his expression changed.

"They got it," he said, turning to me.

"They got it."

"Where?" I asked with enthusiasm.

"At Pier 34."

"Is the silk aboard?" I asked anxiously.

I waited a minute while the lieutenant put the question.

"No," he said, turning back, "the silk's gone."

AS soon as I got up there in the *Dauntless* I got the story again. And it was a neat trick, all right, and a new one.

I turned the *Dauntless* around and headed for the Coast Guard station, figuring that the cutter'd just be about in with the crew. Which was figuring right. It was a sorry lot and looked

sheepish. They'd been scared they were done for, drifting helpless like that, although they needn't have been. They'd have been picked up sooner or later.

I talked with the five who'd been aboard the tug and it was what I'd supposed. One of the birds, named Smithers, had the story down pat. He was the only one who had a gun along, and when he tried to pull it they cracked him. Still, he remembered.

"We ain't gone more than ten minutes," said he, "when that tug come along. We ain't lookin' fer nothing like that, understand. But what we goin' to do?"

Of course it wasn't up to me to give him an answer. I had something on my mind I wanted to find out.

"What I want to know," said I, "was there any other boat around? Anything except the tug?"

"Come to think," he said, finally, "I did."

"And what did she look like?"

"Darned good-looking boat," said he. "And looked like a fast one."

"Low, close to the water, and black?"

"Yes," said he, surprised. "That was it. How did you know?"

WHAT I wanted to do most was to think. Which is the reason I went back to the office. There's something about that back room of mine, maybe the salty air that drifts in from the harbor, that sets your mind clicking.

Mine hadn't clicked much, though, when Douglass came in. He had a lot of papers in his hands, reports, they turned out to be, from the operatives I'd sent around to the different silk manufacturing plants to see if they'd been buying raw silk from anybody they didn't know.

But those birds hadn't turned up a thing but expense accounts. Every one of the twenty firms they'd interviewed said they'd bought nothing except through the established concerns. Just as I'd asked them to, they'd brought

back a full list of purchases for the year.

It didn't seem reasonable that the robbers were stealing the silk for their health. Sixty days had passed since the first batch was stolen and they'd been back three times for more. What I had to figure was how they were getting out the cash.

Along about the middle of the afternoon I got an idea, so I went over and looked at the Far East docks again. And as soon as I got back to my office I had a talk with Douglass.

"I wish you'd call that bunch in from Docks C and D," I told him. "I want to talk to 'em."

"They'll be at work in three hours," Douglass said, as he lighted up again. "How about going over then?"

"That's just what I don't want 'em to do," said I. "I don't want 'em to go to work."

"What's happened?" Douglass asked, amazed. "They didn't call you off the job?"

"No," said I, "I called myself off."

"You mean you're through?"

"Through? Hell! I'm just starting."

I REALLY didn't figure the gunmen would find anything. That wasn't my idea. Still, there was a bare chance that they might, which was the reason I felt I could invest a few dollars in having them look things over on both sides of the river.

"Find that motor boat," I told them when I'd got them all into the office. "Go into every boathouse on the river you can. She's around somewhere and there's a hundred bucks in it for the one who spots her first."

And with that out of the way I dropped around to see Robertson and Thompson. I couldn't help it that they put up a yell. I told them squarely that if they wanted me to handle the case they'd have to let me have my way. I said among other things that there wasn't a chance in a million of anything happening at the docks. I was taking a

chance, of course. At that, you've got to take some chances.

A couple of days passed and nothing much happened. I kind of got a hunch I might be wrong, but was for sticking it out. The only thing that developed was when the gunmen came straggling in saying they hadn't turned anything up. So I paid them off and they went back to their hangouts.

But the lull soon stopped. It was the third night, I think, that I spied her. And what happened then more than made it up for the quiet.

I had a hunch she'd be along, although I expected her after midnight instead of before. Lucky we were ready. We hadn't had the lights out on the *Dauntless* more than half an hour.

The strange motor boat came out of the dark like a shot much the same as on the first night I'd spied her. I figure she was going twenty anyhow. That motor boat certainly was tearing up the sea.

And she was black.

I snapped on the spotlight as soon as I spied her, just to make sure, although I don't believe I'd have mistaken that baby in a hundred years.

Naturally she was ready, too. Her lookout probably had seen us as soon as we'd seen her. I'd no sooner got a beat on her before she turned on her lights and put on speed. She wanted to make a getaway, all right. We were in for a chase and a chase she'd have if I knew my business.

"Full speed ahead!" I ordered and we were off like a bat.

She must have been a good five hundred yards ahead when we got under way. The spray was flying and the cold water beat back in my face. But that wasn't anything.

Lucky, the harbor was pretty clear. Here and there were a few ships at anchor, but not very many. Such as were there had dim lights burning.

With a straightaway like that there wasn't a chance for that baby to hide.

On we went, like a hound chasing a fox and nobody saying a word.

Now I'm onto the tricks of a chase like that, and they're plenty. That's why I took the wheel out of Bradley's hands and did the steering myself. I wanted to keep in behind and let her make the cut through the wind. Then, too, if you're in behind you don't have to fight the side ripples so much.

We were headed toward the open sea, speeding up all the time. From twenty we went to twenty-five and the dial crept on. We were passing the Customs House and a long string of docks. If that boat could stand the pace the *Dauntless* could, too.

While it wasn't a picnic, it wasn't so bad. And a guy who'd been out to enjoy the scenery could have got an eye-full. The golden horn of a dying moon was sticking out from a tuft of clouds into a cluster of blinking stars. When you got used to it it got lighter.

But I didn't have time for the scenery. I had to make the best of my chance. I'd been waiting three nights for just this thing and heavens only knew when it'd happen again. Sometimes when you tip things off you've got to carry them through. I intended to chase that motor boat to China if I had to.

I didn't figure they'd start shooting as soon as they did. I was more surprised than afraid when a couple of pistols commenced spitting back at us.

But the shots went wild. They didn't have one chance in a hundred to hit us, I knew. A motor boat with a swerving deck isn't so much as a firing platform. I think they figured we had yellow blood in our veins and would slow up if it looked like a fight.

"Full speed!" I ordered again, just to make sure we were getting it all, which we were.

And we began to gain a little, for I know we had as much speed as she had. I kept close behind, letting her cut the edge through the air, waiting for the chance to get around on the side. I figure we were both getting all we could

out of the engines. I'm sure that was so on the *Dauntless* and it stood to reason she was hot for a getaway. Finally I turned the wheel back to Bradley and got ready.

The blowoff came sooner than I expected. I hadn't quite figured she'd slow up as soon as she did. I think her engine was getting hot, although maybe it was just a trick.

Anyhow I got ready. I'd made up my mind from the beginning that I'd pull the stunt of keeping right on her heels as far as I could and then scooting around on the side. Bradley could do that as well as I could.

We must have been going thirty, but I'll never be sure, for I didn't have time to look. We were lunging ahead together, neck and neck, and almost ready to bump.

That's when she turned, figuring, I suppose, that we'd go shooting off into the darkness and she'd give us the slip. We were ready for that move just the same and kept right along.

The sides of both boats weren't more than a couple of inches apart, too close for comfort, but still we kept on neck and neck, with me getting ready all the time. I felt of my pistols just to be safe and then braced myself and waited.

Bradley kept watching and I kept signalling. He held her even and looked for the sign. I guess a couple of minutes must have passed before I nodded, but to me it seemed hours. And then I made the leap.

If I live to be a million I'll never forget the sensation. I was in suspended animation for not more than an instant, but it seemed longer than that, the black water under me and two speeding motor boats on each side. And then I landed with a bump on her deck.

I'm sure they weren't looking for me to drop in on them so unexpectedly. If they had they'd have had out their pistols. But they were too stunned to think fast and I had them before they knew it, swinging both pistols back and forth and yelling to stop.

There were three of them aboard, two I didn't know. The third was aft, crouching down, trying to get out of sight, and, although I couldn't see his face, I felt pretty sure.

All I had to do was yell at him and he came out like a rat from a trap. And I wasn't surprised. I'd figured all along it was Thompson, which it was.

"What's the big idea?" I demanded.

"What do you mean 'what's the big idea?'" said the manager of the Far East Company, picking up my words.

"Where are you taking this silk?"

"Silk?"

"Sure. You got silk aboard here."

"Suppose we have," said he, "what of it?"

"And I suppose you're taking it down to the lighter."

"That's about enough," Thompson tried to bluff back. "We hired you to get the silk thieves, not to interfere with our business."

"All right, Mr. Thompson," I said as coolly as I could, "we'll talk that over, too. In the first place it wasn't you who hired me, it was Robertson. In the second place you're under arrest."

"Arrest? Arrest for what?"

"For robbing your own company to collect the insurance," I announced, turning to the man at the wheel. "If you don't mind, we'll just turn around and go back."

Which we did, with the *Dauntless* following behind.

NATURALLY I didn't get much sleep that night or all the next day. There was plenty that kept me busy all right, arguing it out as I had to with Thompson and seeing that there wasn't any mistake in checking up the bales in the warehouses. So I was as tired as the tail end of a misspent life, when the telephone rang.

Robertson, it was, who wanted me to stop by his hotel for a talk. Which I did, an hour later, on the way uptown.

"You've done a good job," said he, "but I wish you'd tell me how you came

to get the idea. I'd never suspected him. How did you come to?"

Of course I was glad enough to explain. And I tried to be modest about it, even to letting him think I'd been taking a chance, which I hadn't.

"It kind of all fitted together," I began, "the whole chain of things. In the first place, it was you, not Thompson, who brought me into the case. If he'd have been anxious about the business he'd have taken the lead."

"But he did," Robertson reminded me. "He notified the police."

"That's just the point," I declared. "He said he did, but he didn't."

"Why——" Robertson was dumfounded.

"There was no police report anywhere," I explained. "I checked up on that. I didn't suspect Thompson at first, mind you, and what I was after was the police record of what they'd done. He never talked to the police at all. That's where I got my first hunch that he was mixed up. Then I got the record of the bales that he'd sold—"

"What record?" Robertson asked.

"Well, I got from the different manufacturing companies the amounts they bought in the year and from the Far East books I got the amount they'd reported sold. With one company, the Columbia, the thing didn't jibe at all. Their record showed they'd bought more than the Far East books showed. What Thompson was doing was getting the silk out, collecting the insurance and reselling the silk to the Columbia company. He knew the lay of the land and staged the holdups. And he staged them when he knew the coast was clear."

"Where did he keep the stuff?"

"Outside. That's why we weren't able to locate the warehouse along the river. That's where the boat was going when we nabbed her. He hadn't figured we suspected him. He thought he was O.K. That was my idea—to give him a rope by which he'd hang himself—when I pulled off the guard."

The TURQUOISE RING



ROCKY FORD, on the north side of Long Island, is a hamlet of less than five hundred inhabitants, except during the brief summer season when the beach cottages are filled with Metropolitans seeking relief from the burning asphalts of New York. Minor offenses sometimes occur in its neighborhood, but crimes are rare.

The people of Rocky Ford are of ancient stock. Their forebears have owned the land upon which the present generation dwells, for two, three, and, in some cases, for four centuries. They are sturdy conservative folk, slow to accept strangers, but, by the same token, once a man has found favor with them, loyal to a degree.

Such a man was James Hathaway, the village constable. For twenty years Hathaway had served the township of Rocky Ford. He was a tall, gangling sort of a man, with mild blue eyes, set deeply and widely apart under their prominent orbital arches, a bold, aquiline nose that belied the mild expression of the eyes, and a somewhat elongated face, which in profile showed the Norse strain markedly.

It showed this strain more than ever as he replaced the receiver of the telephone. The message which he had just received over the wire would have startled most men in his position to a pitch of excitement. It merely caused Hathaway to run his long, bony fingers through his sandy, wire-like thatch of hair with a helpless sort of motion, and to move his eyes about the little office as if ashamed to the point of apology, that so unheard of a thing had come to disturb its usual tranquillity.

The message which he had just received was as brief as it was startling, and the voice which had transmitted it to him had been succinct. The voice—it was a man's, had said merely:

"This is Stockley, Mr. Douglas Poole's butler, speaking from Soundview Manor. Mr. Poole has died—murdered, I think! Will you come at once?"

When Hathaway had replied in the affirmative, and before he had had time to ask any questions, the owner of the voice had hung up. The constable sat looking at the telephone for a moment in silence. He was on the point of reaching for the instru-

ment to inquire the particulars, but instead he took down his hat, wound his muffler about his throat, and closing the door against the flurry of snow that scurried in, started down the road, with his head butting into the February blizzard.

At the forks of the road he cut through the woods, partly because it was a shortcut to the Bluffs overlooking the sound, upon which Mr. Douglas Poole's mansion stood, and partly to keep the biting wind out of his face by the slightly altered course. In summer, these woods abounded in woodcock and pheasants, and the foliage was astir with a hundred winged songsters, but now they lay stark and silent under a foot of snow, which swirled away behind him in small savage gusts as his boots dislodged it at each step.

His mind was busily engaged with speculation. He knew Mr. Douglas Poole—or, since he seemed to be dead—had known him, as well as a man in his humble circumstances could know a man of Poole's social and financial standing. He knew that although Poole was less than forty years old, he had amassed a fortune that was counted in millions, that he had no children and that his wife spent most of her time abroad or in California. He had met the financier frequently on the latter's rambles about the woods, had even joined him once in a fishing expedition on the sound for mackerel, and had smoked many a quiet pipe with him in the little constable's office next to the fire station. Hathaway had found Poole an agreeable companion, a quiet, unassuming man who never bragged about his wealth, but who, to the contrary, rather deplored it.

The constable paused for breath at the edge of the bluffs, overlooking the tidewater estuary called the Creek, which was an arm of the Long Island Sound, and which now lay ice-

free and black like a band of mourning upon the white landscape. Upon the bluffs overlooking this creek, and facing the sound, the summer people had built their cottages. Some were mansions rather than cottages, for the beauty and solitude of the country about Rocky Ford had attracted not a few discriminating folks like the Pooles—or rather like Mr. Poole. His wife spent only a few months there in the summer.

It was at the gate of one of these better class homes that Hathaway turned in. As he walked up the path from which the snow had not been cleared since the beginning of the storm, he noted how skilfully the house had been designed to conform with the irregular contour of the bluff upon which it was built. It was of Norman architecture, and a series of broad terraces, now hidden under a foot of snow, fell away toward the sound.

Stockley, the butler, answered the bell. As the constable stamped the snow from his feet in the vestibule, he asked a few quick questions to which Stockley replied with a sort of breathless haste, as if he were anxious to rid himself once and forever of the subject of his master's death.

The butler led Hathaway into the library. As the constable entered, he noted the evidence of good taste on every hand. He was not a connoisseur in the art of furnishing, but he was struck at once by the cosiness of the room, and the feeling that it reflected the personality of the owner struck him forcibly. Taken up with the matter in hand, as his mind was, he did not observe anything in detail. He was conscious merely that he had pictured Poole in surroundings exactly like these.

He was brought out of his ruminations by the butler who, preceding him into the room, had stopped in his tracks. Hathaway followed

Stockley's eyes to the still figure on the floor beside the davenport.

"Are you sure he's dead?" he asked for want of something better to say.

"Yes—quite sure. He was shot, sir—through the head," the butler replied.

Hathaway dropped to his knees beside the still figure. He touched Poole with faltering fingers. The man had been his friend and the constable's contact with crime of the graver sort had been as limited as was his medical knowledge. He had read somewhere, of rigor mortis setting in and lasting for a certain short period after death. Since the body was not only ice-cold, but also perfectly limp, he reasoned that Poole had been dead a long time.

"When did you discover him?" he asked.

"Five minutes before I called you on the telephone. I had just returned from a visit to my sick sister in New York. I came back on the two-fifteen. I knew that something was wrong the moment I came into the house. The fire in the furnace had nearly gone out, and the house was cold as a stone."

Hathaway nodded. He had been walking fast and had therefore not noticed the low temperature of the room until now. He lifted the dead man's head and saw that Poole had been shot through the temple. On the floor, nearby, lay a thirty-eight caliber automatic pistol.

"What makes you think that he was murdered?" he asked.

"Mr. Poole was not left-handed, sir," the butler replied.

Hathaway looked at the speaker, then at the dead man.

"Oh, I see," he said, "shot in the left temple. You're right, it could hardly be suicide."

"Mr. Poole would have no reason for committing suicide," the butler replied in a low tone.

Hathaway picked up the pistol and

carrying it to the light, examined it. Opening the chamber he saw that just one of the shells in the clip had been discharged.

"Have you ever seen this gun before?" he asked.

"Oh, yes sir; it's Mr. Poole's. But I'm sure he did not use it upon himself. The murderer must have put it there on the floor to make it look like suicide."

"Where did Mr. Poole keep the pistol?"

"In the drawer of this table," the butler replied, pointing to a small smoking-stand nearby. "We have been visited by prowlers more than once this winter. He bought the weapon to frighten them away in case someone should try to force entrance. But I don't think he ever would have used it. Mr. Poole was too kind-hearted to offer violence, even to a burglar."

Hathaway agreed mentally with this statement. Poole never carried a gun in all his wanderings about the countryside. The financier on one occasion expressed himself very forcefully to the constable against men who kill small game for the sport of it.

"Have you communicated with Mrs. Poole?" he asked of Stockley.

"No, sir. I've not had time—and I hardly know what to say to her. I decided to get the advice of the authorities first, so I called you. Mrs. Poole is in Beverly Hills, California. She left here late in January and took her maid and the cook with her."

"I see," said Hathaway. "Then you and your master have been here alone?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Poole did not expect to return until the latter part of May."

"You said that you've been visiting your sister in New York. When did you leave here?"

"On the ten-thirty yesterday morn-

ing. I stayed at her house last night and returned on the two-fifteen today."

"When you left, you didn't notice anything unusual in his behavior—anything that might point to suicide?"

A shadow as if of annoyance passed over the butler's face.

"Certainly not, sir; and you can never make me believe that he took his own life. He was in excellent spirits when I left. He joked about having to batch, as he called it, alone for twenty-four hours. I laid the table for dinner before I went and set out cold meat and preserved fruit for him in the pantry. I also prepared the things for his breakfast, so that he would have little trouble in getting it. He was not what you call a helpless man. He ate his dinner last night, as the table in the dining room shows, but he did not prepare his breakfast this morning. By that I infer that this terrible thing occurred some time after dinner and before midnight."

"Why before midnight?"

"Mr. Poole was in the habit of retiring promptly at eleven o'clock when alone. As you note he is fully dressed. I'm quite sure that he met his death some time before that hour. He was a man of very regular habits."

Hathaway dropped to his knees beside the dead man. He signaled to Stockley, and the two men lifted Poole to the davenport. As they did so, the butler gave vent to an exclamation. He held his dead master's right hand up to the light and pointed to the third finger which bore a turquoise ring of antique design. Hathaway glanced inquiringly from the ring to the butler.

"What's the matter with it?" he asked.

"Nothing," Stockley replied, "except that I've never seen that ring before. In fact, in the two years I've

been with Mr. Poole, I've never known him to wear a piece of jewelry of any kind except his shirt studs. He has never worn a ring during my term of employment. Of that I'm sure. And if he did, he would certainly not wear it on his right hand. I am positive now that he was murdered and that the murderer slipped the ring upon his finger to confuse us."

"Rather far-fetched, Stockley," Hathaway replied, "however, we'll look into it." He ran his hands into the dead man's pockets and emptied them of their contents. There was a Russian leather cigar case, a bill-folder containing three twenty-dollar notes and a ten, a gold penknife, some loose change, two letters, one from a Nassau Street broker and the other from Mrs. Poole, postmarked Beverly Hills, California.

"If murder was committed, the motive was evidently not robbery," he said. "Has anything in the house been disturbed?"

"Nothing downstairs as far as I have been able to ascertain," the butler replied. "I haven't been upstairs yet."

"Let's go up and see," said Hathaway.

Stockley led the way up the broad staircase to the floor above. They passed down a short hall with doors on either side.

"This part of the house is kept closed during Mrs. Poole's absence," the butler explained. "Mr. Poole's apartment is at the end of the hall, and my room is directly opposite."

He stopped as he spoke and opened a door to the right. The room which the two men entered was large, airy and comfortable, a combination living-room and bed chamber. A Colonial four-poster bed was sunk in an alcove directly opposite a wide fireplace, about which easy chairs were grouped. On the smoking stand near one of these chairs, Hath-

away noted a half-smoked cigarette.

The room was in perfect order. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. The door of the closet stood ajar. He crossed to it and opened it. A score or more of suits hung there in an orderly row upon hangers; on the floor beneath them stood a dozen pairs of shoes. One suit hanger was empty. Hathaway pointed to it.

"Anything missing?" he asked.

"Why—no!" Stockley hesitated. He reached out his hand and plucked at the sleeve of one of the suits, a brown one. "He was wearing this suit when I left yesterday. In the excitement I had not noticed that he had changed to the gray one which he's wearing now." He paused. "There's something mighty strange about this whole thing. Look, the bed has not been slept in. And why should he change clothes when he was dining alone? Particularly as the gray suit is one which he never has liked. He always complained that it did not fit him comfortably, and said that he was going to give it away."

"He might have put it on to go out in the storm," Hathaway objected, "he was fond of walking and he would naturally have changed into a suit which he didn't care about." He crossed to the smoking-stand and picked up the half-smoked cigarette. "I suppose this is the brand he regularly smoked?" he asked.

"Mr. Poole never smoked cigarettes," the butler replied in a low tense voice, as he bent forward and examined the object; "there are several boxes of cigarettes in the pantry for the use of guests, but none is of that brand."

"H'm," said the constable, "it certainly begins to look like some stranger had been here." He crossed to the door in the far side of the room, opened it and stepped into a well-appointed bathroom. There was every evidence that someone had

taken a bath there recently, and had not been very careful about cleaning up afterwards. There were marks of not over-clean feet upon the bath-mat, and a turkish towel, very much soiled, was flung over the edge of the tub. The dark ring inside the tub showed that the bather had been very much in need of the ablution. Hathaway and Stockley looked at one another in silence.

"Do you know if Mr. Poole had enemies that would have wished his death?" the constable asked.

"To the best of my belief he didn't have an enemy in the world," Stockley replied.

"He didn't say anything about expecting company during your absence?"

"On the contrary. He remarked that he hoped the storm would not delay me in getting back today, as he did not like to be alone in the house at this time of the year."

"He seemed apprehensive that something was going to happen, you mean?"

"Not at all, sir; he was not a timid man—at least not in the ordinary sense."

"What do you mean—not in the ordinary sense?" Hathaway asked.

The butler hesitated.

"Well, sir," he said after a pause, "I hardly know how to put it. Mr. Poole was a very lonely man, if you know what I mean."

Hathaway nodded. He had made this mental observation himself about Poole on their second meeting.

"He did not like to be alone," the butler went on; "we do a great deal of entertaining during Mrs. Poole's absence. There's someone here nearly every night except in inclement weather like this. He was a very popular host."

"What has that to do with timidity?" the constable asked.

"I was coming to that, sir, and I can explain it to you best by re-

lating something that took place about two weeks ago—on the evening of February third, to be exact. If you recall, we had a strong northerly gale that night. Mr. Poole expected some friends over from Douglaston, but they called up at six o'clock and said that because of the weather they would not be over. When Mr. Poole hung up the receiver he turned to me and said: 'That means another evening alone for me, Stockley,' and began pacing the floor nervously. He seemed greatly put out about their not coming, and when I was busy at the sideboard during dinner he asked me if I had ever been afraid of myself. I was a bit startled at the question and replied that I hadn't, and he said: 'You're a lucky man, Stockley.'

"I hardly knew what to reply, so I kept silent, and when I served the dessert he said: 'Did you ever feel as if you wanted to run away from yourself, Stockley?' I told him that I couldn't say that I had, and that I didn't see how I could even if I had wanted to. He laughed and said that my mind evidently never traveled in circles, and I replied that I was thankful that it didn't."

Hathaway smiled.

"Did he have those moods often?" he asked.

"Not very often. Only when he was alone. He did not like to be alone. He was never so happy as when the house was full of people, and he was always the life of the party."

The two men returned downstairs.

"I will notify the coroner," Hathaway said. "In the meantime, you'd better wire Mrs. Poole." The butler nodded. "And don't disturb anything. Leave everything as it is. I am not at all convinced that murder has been committed; still we must not take any chances." He paused. "Who were the people Mr. Poole expected from Douglaston?" he asked.

"Mr. Warren Hunt, an old friend, and some guests of his."

"W. A. Hunt, the insurance man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Hunt is an old friend of the family, you say?"

"Of Mr. Poole's, sir. He only came here during Mrs. Poole's absence, but Mr. Poole visited him often at Douglaston."

II

THE constable was a busy man for the next few days. At the instance of Garth, the district attorney, the coroner had delayed the inquest. Garth and the constable were seated at the latter's office one evening going over the evidence. In the final summing up it was disquietingly contradictory.

The half-smoked cigarette and the condition of the bathroom pointed to the presence of some visitor on the fateful night. Douglas Poole, the fastidious, would hardly have left such marks of slovenliness behind him. However, certain finger prints found upon the rim of the tub were discovered to correspond with those taken of the dead man by the fingerprint expert from New York. Nor were there any finger prints anywhere else in the bathroom other than his. The butler testified that he had cleaned up the room the morning before he left for New York. This statement was borne out by the fact that every finger print was fresh and quite clear and distinct. On the other hand, there was the presence of the mysterious, half-smoked cigarette, and then the turquoise ring which Stockley, who was more of a personal valet than a butler, denied knowledge of.

Garth, the district attorney, frowned. He was a small, wiry man with coarse iron gray hair that lay plastered about his temples like a wig, black penetrating eyes that

seemed enormously enlarged by the thick lenses of the glasses he wore, and a lean face, crisscrossed by a network of fine wrinkles that began at the corners of his eyes and spread fanwise over his leathery cheeks.

"If it wasn't for the fact that the man was shot through the left temple and for the presence of the cigarette, I'd say it was a plain case of suicide," he remarked, "and I'd say it anyhow if anyone should ask me. The powder marks, too, point to suicide. If he was shot by someone else, the murderer practically pressed the gun to his temple, which would be somewhat difficult to imagine."

Hathaway remained silent. He was an intensely practical man. He had noted among other things that the dead man's shoes had shown indisputable evidence that their wearer had been for a walk, and that where he had walked, the ground had been soft and sticky with red mud. There was only one place in Rocky Ford where this red mud was found, in the cut near the railway station, a distance of more than two miles from Soundview Manor. This showed that Poole had been for a walk and that he had taken this walk early in the evening, since it had begun to snow at eight o'clock. This was further borne out by the statement of Orrin, a farmer, who said that on the evening in question, when he was returning from meeting his wife at the seven-forty train, they passed Poole in the cut. As the headlights of Orrin's car fell upon Poole, he stepped to the side of the road. Orrin said that his wife remarked that she had never seen Poole dressed in such garments before. He was wearing an old coat the collar of which was turned up about his ears and a battered hat pulled down over his eyes. If the headlight of the car had not fallen full upon his face for an instant as

he stepped aside to let them pass, she would never have recognized him, she said.

There was nothing important in the fact that some of this same mud was found on the mat in the bath room. The important fact was that Stockley, the butler, stated positively that the shoes on the dead man's feet were not part of Mr. Poole's wardrobe, that he, Stockley, had never seen them before, and that every pair of shoes in the dead man's closet were of the same make, a totally different one from the pair upon his feet, and further, that the pair which Poole was wearing when Stockley left for New York were gone.

All of these curious discrepancies passed through Hathaway's mind. He did not try to account for them. In his capacity as constable it was his duty to bring the murderer to justice, if murder had been done, but stronger than that was the desire to see his friend avenged. Though socially at the opposite poles, there had been a sort of invisible bond between the two men. Poole had never talked about his family affairs, but, from a chance remark or two, the constable had gathered that there was some sort of a skeleton in the closet at Soundview Manor, and his talk with Stockley, a few days ago, had borne this out. As much out of affection for his dead friend as from a sense of official duty, Hathaway made up his mind to go to the bottom of the thing; to leave no stone unturned and no trail unfollowed to the end.

It was with this thought in his mind that he went to New York the following day and took with him the pair of shoes which Poole had worn when found dead. He also took with him the turquoise ring. He had no difficulty in finding the store where the shoes were purchased. The date stamped on the lining was clear and

distinct. The store was on Broadway in the upper Forties, and the manager treated him with the greatest of courtesy, when Hathaway stated his errand. The date stamp on the lining was compared with the record of the sale, a simple entry to keep track of the stock, and, in the case of charge customers, as a means of checking up in event of complaint from faulty workmanship.

There was no name or address opposite this sales record, and the constable had not expected there would be. He interviewed the clerk who had sold the shoes, but the man was unable to remember what the purchaser looked like. He had sold several hundred pairs of shoes of the same model since.

Checking the package of shoes at the Long Island check room of the Pennsylvania station, Hathaway called at a wholesale jewelry firm in Maiden Lane and from them secured a list of all the retail jewelers in the city of New York and Brooklyn who handled antiques. Before leaving, he showed the turquoise ring to the salesman who waited on him. The man held the ring up to the light and examined it closely.

"It's a genuine antique, not a manufactured one," he said. "It was made by hand in the Byzantine period, and it is an exceptionally fine example of the goldsmith craft of that era. I would say, sir, that this ring, from a collector's standpoint, is almost priceless." He paused and brought a magnifying glass to bear on it. "It has been mended recently. Two of the prongs holding the stone in place are of new gold, poorly matched. The man who repaired it was a bungler."

"You don't think, then, that it was bought in New York?" Hathaway asked.

The salesman shook his head.

"Not unless at a private sale. No specimen as perfect as this ring has

entered the Port of New York in ten years. In a dealer's catalogue it would be snapped up within twenty-four hours. I know of a man who would pay five thousand dollars for it and think it cheap at the price. It is quite evident that the owner of it did not realize its value, or he would not have taken it to an unskilled repair man."

Hathaway thanked the salesman for the information, and went off on his task of running down this unskilled artisan. The search had taken an unexpected turn. He had hoped to run down the purchaser of the ring which, if it had been bought in New York, would have been difficult enough task, but not an impossible one, because of its unique design and workmanship. He was now confronted with the problem of finding a repair man among the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such on the densely populated Island of Manhattan. It was a task that would have discouraged most men, but Hathaway came of a stock that had endured because of dogged persistence.

He went about the matter with systematic thoroughness. He did not waste his time with the big stores on the fashionable avenues that employed high-priced and skilled mechanics. For three days he canvassed the Chelsea, Greenwich and Bowery sections, but without result. On the lower West Side—the Hell's Kitchen area—he had no better luck. On the fourth day he decided upon heroic measures. In the classified advertising section of all the morning and evening papers he inserted the following notice:

If the man who repaired a turquoise ring of antique byzantine design within the last month or two will call at Room 206, Hotel Worthington and identify it or the owner of it, a reward of twenty-five dollars will be paid to him.

The result of the advertisement was startling. Not less than half a hundred persons called during the day and the next, in the hope of collecting the twenty-five dollar reward, but not one of them described the ring correctly, nor the repairs that had been done to it. Finally when Hathaway had about given up getting information from this source, a little old man with a Hebraic cast of countenance shambled in. Hathaway had by this time grown wary after the experience with one or two of the applicants who were frankly charlatans hoping by colorful stories to collect a reward. His questions to the little man were therefore guarded.

"When did you repair such a ring?" he asked.

"About six weeks ago," the man answered. He drew a piece of pasteboard from his pocket. "This is the repair check," he said, "the date January third is on it."

"What was the nature of the repairs?"

"Two of the prongs holding the stone were broken off. I made two new prongs and cemented the stone."

"May I see the check, please?"

The man handed him the piece of pasteboard. Upon it was written the date, the nature of the repairs, a Brooklyn address and the name, Lake.

"Can you describe the ring?"

"Oh, yes!" the man replied, "it was a very unusual one. I had never seen one like it before."

He described it in detail. Hathaway laid the ring on the table.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the man replied, without a moment's hesitation. He picked it up and screwing a jeweler's magnifying glass into his eye, stepped to the window. "If you will examine it through this magnifying glass you'll see that two of the

prongs are of a different color gold. I was unable to match it exactly. The ring is very old. The red gold of which it is made is not used today. Everyone wants something that looks like platinum."

"Do you know the owner?" Hathaway asked.

"No, sir. I had never seen him before. He came into my shop one morning with the ring and asked me to fix it for him, and he called for it that same afternoon."

"I assume that the handwriting on this check is your own?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you know the man again if you saw him?"

"I think so."

Hathaway drew out a picture of the dead financier and handed it to the man.

"Is this he?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, that's the man."

Hathaway made a note of the address given on the repair check, then handed the man the promised twenty-five dollars. As the jeweler folded up the bills and stuck them in his pocket, he said:

"Was the ring stolen?"

Hathaway shook his head. "I merely wanted to trace its history. It's an antique. I'm interested in antiques."

When the man had gone, Hathaway took the subway to the Brooklyn address which he had copied from the repair check. He found the house an old three-story wooden affair sadly in need of repair, located in one of the poorer tenement districts near the East River. A frowsy woman in frowsy garments answered the bell, and replied to his queries with evident reluctance.

"Mr. Lake has a room here, yes, but I haven't seen him but once in the last month. He comes and goes. Sometimes he's away for weeks and sometimes he's here for quite a spell. No, I don't know what his business

is. I don't inquire about my tenants' business. I've got troubles enough of my own. So long as they pays their rent on time, I'm satisfied. Mr. Lake pays by the month in advance."

"When did you see him last?" Hathaway asked.

"A week ago yesterday. He was in his room only for a couple of hours, and left late in the afternoon. I haven't seen him since, and maybe won't see him again for a week or two, perhaps more. He'd been out of town for over a month."

Hathaway glanced at the woman. The evening of the day she had mentioned was the date of Poole's death. He drew out the picture of the dead financier and handed it to her.

"Is this Mr. Lake?" he asked.

"Sure, that's him. What's up?"

"Nothing is up. I'm just trying to locate him for his relatives. What time did he come in on the day you mentioned?"

"Around two o'clock."

Hathaway thought back. Stockley, the butler, had left Soundview Manor on the ten-thirty train. If Poole was here on that day he must have followed on the next. This tallied with the farmer Orrin's and his wife's statement that they had met Poole in the cut near the railway station. He must have returned from Brooklyn on that very train. What had he been doing here and for what purpose did a man of his standing keep a room in this sordid part of Brooklyn under an assumed and poorly disguised name?

He asked a few more questions of the woman, which elicited no information of importance, so he thanked her and left.

III

WHEN he got back to Rocky Ford he went straight to Soundview Manor.

"I want to ask you a few questions, Stockley," he told the butler when the man had ushered him into the library.

Stockley nodded and remained standing, waiting.

"These questions are of a more or less private nature, but you may answer them with perfect safety. I shall not violate your confidence. I am not here to pry into the affairs of the dead from idle curiosity."

The butler inclined his head gravely, but remained silent.

"What was the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Poole?" Hathaway asked.

"Well, sir," the butler replied, "I've asked myself that question many a time. Mrs. Poole is a very reserved and quiet woman, opposite in temperament to Mr. Poole who was, well—gregarious, I believe the word is. He used that expression of himself, often. He liked to have the house full of guests, but when Mrs. Poole was here we did not entertain at all. If I may be pardoned for discussing my dead master's affairs, I want to say that in no previous service have I noticed such temperamental differences between master and mistress."

"You mean that they quarreled frequently?"

"Not at all, sir. I've never heard either one raise a voice against the other. Mr. Poole's devotion to his wife was remarkable, one might almost say pitiful. During the two or three months of each year which she spent here with him, he waited upon her hand and foot."

"Why pitiful?" Hathaway asked.

"Because his attentions seemed to annoy her. While I never actually saw her push him away, I could tell by the look in her eyes that they were unwelcome. She is as cold and austere as she is beautiful."

Hathaway nodded. This had been his own estimate of Mrs. Poole from

the few glimpses he had had of her through the plateglass windows of her sedan, as she was driven about the countryside by her liveried chauffeur.

The constable drew the turquoise ring from his pocket.

"Stockley," he said, "I found that this ring belonged to your dead master."

He informed the butler of what the jewelry repair man had told him.

The butler stared at the ring in silence.

"I don't understand it," was all he said.

"When do you expect Mrs. Poole back from California?" Hathaway asked.

"She's back already. I had a long distance telephone message from her about an hour and a half ago. She had just stepped off the train at the Grand Central station and said that she was motoring right out. She ought to be here any moment now."

"I'll wait and see her," Hathaway said almost as the horn of a motor sounded outside.

"Here she is now," the butler cried out. "I'll tell her that you're here."

The woman who entered the library a few minutes later was slight, almost petite, and very beautiful. Hathaway had never seen her at close range before. As he arose she came toward him slowly, but with no suggestion of timidity. Placing one small, gloved hand upon the back of a chair, she paused and said:

"You wish to see me?"

There was something oddly incongruous in her attitude, an air of combativeness, and Hathaway could not rid himself of the notion that the hard look in her deep blue eyes was equally assumed. Her graying hair was abundant and framed a face at once piquant and defiant. There was no trace of tears upon her face. She seemed perfectly composed.

The constable was the one to feel ill at ease.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, vaguely.

"About—what?"

The coldness of her tone brought the constable back to his official dignity.

"About your husband's death, ma'am," he said.

"Yes?"

"We're not quite satisfied that it was suicide."

"No?"

"No, ma'am."

Mrs. Poole did not change position, nor her face, expression. She stood motionless, with her gloved hand on the back of the chair, waiting for him to go on.

"We think that he might have met with foul play."

Beyond a deep intake of breath and a sudden startled look in the woman's eyes, which passed as quickly as it had come, she showed no emotion whatever.

"Ridiculous," she said.

Hathaway was nettled not so much by the exclamation as by the tone in which it was uttered.

"Not so ridiculous," he said with an effort to keep the rising asperity out of his voice. "Your husband was not left-handed, ma'am, was he?"

For the first time Mrs. Poole showed real emotion. Her gloved hand flew to her throat, and her body seemed to incline forward, as if the question had been a blow.

"What do you mean?" she ejaculated in a barely audible voice.

"I mean that your husband was shot through the left temple, an unnatural, if not difficult thing for a right-handed man to do. When your butler told us that Mr. Poole was not left-handed, we naturally became suspicious."

"I see," said Mrs. Poole, who had regained her composure, but strove to keep it with ill-concealed effort.

"It is, of course, the nature of the police to be suspicious."

"It is not, ma'am," Hathaway replied sharply. "The authorities of Rocky Ford are just as anxious to avoid undesirable notoriety as you are. We are peaceful people here."

"Just so," she replied, "and therefore I hope that you'll do nothing to cause me unnecessary embarrassment."

"Rest assured of that, ma'am," the constable replied. "If you can suggest a good and sufficient motive for the act, our investigations will be dropped. The district attorney is inclined that way already. A motive is all that is necessary to make him drop the matter."

"I'm sure I couldn't give you one," Mrs. Poole replied.

"Mr. Poole was not in financial difficulties?" Hathaway queried.

"I really couldn't tell you. I have my own private fortune. I never inquired into my husband's affairs. I was entirely independent of him."

"Any personal reasons you can think of—in your relationship with your husband, I mean?" the constable asked pointedly.

Mrs. Poole shot him a quick, veiled glance, as if trying to estimate how much he knew.

"None whatever. We were on the best of terms."

"Yet you lived at this house for only two or three months a year, and saw little of him beyond that."

"Our domestic arrangement was distinctly—our business," Mrs. Poole replied icily.

Hathaway dropped his eyes. He appeared properly rebuked, but into his gray eyes there came a light that ought to have warned her. He ran his finger into his pocket and drew out the turquoise ring and laid it upon the table.

"I don't suppose you ever saw this before?" he asked softly.

The transformation in Mrs.

Poole's attitude was startling. She took a step forward and her hands rose in the air as if to ward off a blow. She stared at the ring with an expression at once of horror and incredulity.

"Where did you get it?" she finally managed to stammer.

"Does it belong to your husband?" Hathaway parried.

"No!—Yes! Where did you get it?"

"From your husband's finger. He was wearing it when we found him."

"Impossible! Good Heaven! Yes—yes, of course it is my husband's." She reached out her hand for it, but Hathaway was too quick for her.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but—I cannot turn it over to you except upon an order from the court."

"But it is my property," she exclaimed.

"Not until the court says so," Hathaway rejoined.

"What are you going to do with it? It had nothing to do with his death."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Poole? Why then are you so anxious to get it back?"

"Because of its associations. Its value to me is purely sentimental. It was a present from me to—to Mr. Poole."

In view of the fact of what Stockley had told Hathaway of the relationship between his master and mistress, this statement carried little conviction.

"I'm sorry," the constable said, "but you can see that I'm powerless in the matter. You may rest assured, however, that no harm shall come to it. I'll hold myself personally responsible for its return when this thing is settled. You have nothing to say, then, that might throw light upon the affair?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing. Very well, Stockley," she called out over her shoulder as the butler an-

nounced that luncheon was served. "Is there anything else you wish to know?" she asked of Hathaway.

"At present, no. Sorry to have troubled you, ma'am. Good-day."

On his way back to the office, Hathaway did some deep thinking. He was now convinced more than ever that there was something very much wrong at Soundview Manor. He bethought himself of Mr. Warren Hunt at Douglaston, the old friend of Mr. Poole, who never visited Soundview Manor except during Mrs. Poole's absence. The constable decided to pay him a call.

IV

HE found Hunt, a heavy-faced man of military mien and bearing, standing with his back against the fireplace in the living room of his palatial home overlooking the bay, fingering the edge of the card which the constable had sent in, as if to test it for cutting qualities.

"I've been told that you were an old friend of Mr. Poole's," Hathaway said. "I thought you might be able to tell us something that would help to clear the thing up."

Hunt regarded him in silence for a moment, and he said: "Clear it up? Just what do you mean? I thought it was a clear case of suicide."

"Do you know of any reason why Mr. Poole should have taken his own life?"

"I do, and I don't."

"Will you explain?"

"I suppose I might as well. If I don't you'll drag it out of me in court under oath," he added, disagreeably.

Hathaway dropped his eyes. He had a proper pride in his profession.

"I am a servant of the people of Rocky Ford and a friend of Mr. Poole's" he said, mildly.

Hunt's face relaxed some of its severity.

"I've heard him speak of you," he said. "What is it you wish to know?"

"How long have you known Mr. Poole?"

"Since we were both young men. Nearly twenty years."

"Before he was married to Mrs. Poole?"

"Yes."

"What do you know about the relationship that existed between Mr. Poole and his wife?"

Hunt glanced at the other out of the tail of his eye.

"Is it necessary to drag the family skeleton out in the open?" he parried.

"I'm afraid it is," Hathaway replied gently. "As his friend you would wish to see him vindicated of the stigma of suicide."

Hunt started.

"Then you do not believe that he took his own life?"

"I do not."

"Why?"

"Mr. Hunt, you and I have known him well—you intimately, myself well enough to know that he was not the type of man who would take his own life. Will you tell me what you know?"

"I will do my best, but I assure you that it has no bearing upon the tragedy."

"How do you know that it hasn't?"

"Because I'm in the possession of the evidence."

"And what is that, may I ask?"

"Something which as a gentleman I'm bound by a promise not to divulge."

"Not even under oath?"

"Not even under oath, sir."

Hathaway remained silent for a moment. He knew that he was dealing with a man of high sense of honor, and that whatever information he gleaned would be authentic.

"Will you tell me what you know about the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Poole?" he asked.

The insurance broker drew a deep breath.

"I suppose I'd better. It may prevent it from being aired in court." He glanced at the other keenly. "I believe that I can trust you not to divulge a word of what I tell you, unless you are forced to by the court."

Hathaway nodded.

"Even then I would give *you* the first chance to tell it—or as much as the court required you to tell."

"Very well then." Hunt pointed to a chair. "It's rather a long story, as well as a somewhat strange one. Please be seated."

"It is necessary to go back some fifteen years," he went on. "Mr. Poole was traveling with a companion in the Orient. At Constantinople he met Mrs. Poole, then Miss Ruth Stanhope, who was touring the near East with her aunt. It was a case of love at first sight with him, and so, unfortunately, it also was with the companion who traveled with him. The two men were equally ardent in their pursuit of the beautiful Miss Stanhope, and it soon became apparent to everyone that the girl preferred Mr. Poole's companion to himself. This man, whose identity I'm not at liberty to disclose, was light-hearted and gay, whereas my friend Douglas Poole was more serious and inclined to moodiness.

"It was a most unfortunate state of affairs, particularly as Mr. Poole's companion, whom we will call Brown, was a very undesirable youth. Mr. Poole had taken him along to try to straighten him up at the instance of the man's family, but he was not making a very good job of it. Brown was the sort of fellow that nothing would straighten up—weak, shallow, a drunkard, a cheater

at cards—and more, a man absolutely unscrupulous with women, a handsome devil who walked abroad only because his family's money and influence had kept him out of the penitentiary.

"My friend was in a quandary. Aside from the fact that he, himself, was madly in love with Miss Stanhope, he was bound by a sort of Quixotic sense of honor not to apprise the girl of Brown's true character, and he was forced to stand by and see the woman he loved about to become the wife of a man who would ruin her life and fling her aside, as he had done with other women in past illicit amours."

Hunt paused.

"I hold no brief for my friend's actions during what followed. I only know that, aside from the perfectly normal desire to make Miss Stanhope his wife, his one consideration was her happiness. If the other man had been worthy he would have stepped aside. His one aim now was to save her from the wretchedness which, as the wife of Brown, was in store for her. He tried pleading with Brown, and appealing to his sense of chivalry, of which the other had none. He tried to show him that for hygienic reasons he must not go through with this thing, but Brown laughed and said that his physicians had given him a clean bill of health which Poole knew was a lie and as subsequent developments proved.

"As I have said, I hold no brief for what Poole did. I only know that his desire to save the girl was utterly unselfish. By a trick, the particulars of which do not matter, he got her into a position where it was necessary to marry him to save her honor. A priest—they were both Catholics—in a monastery at the outskirts of Constantinople performed the ceremony. The aunt was furious. Brown, running true to form, and now free from Poole's re-

strait, plunged into a series of orgies, which the girl, misunderstanding, ascribed to despair at her jilting of him, and her love for Brown increased with her hatred and contempt for Poole, who, she thought, had tricked her into marriage for selfish reasons.

"However, being a Catholic, she stuck to her bargain. And I will say this for her—not once during all the years that followed did she communicate with her lover. Of that I'm convinced. He attempted to see her on several occasions, but she refused to permit him to, and letters from him she returned unopened. I'm telling you this merely to show you that she is a woman with a strong sense of honor, as well as a cruel and relentless one. Poole paid for his action with his happiness. He had hoped that she would grow to love him some day, and his own love for her grew with her hatred of him. It was a most heart-breaking thing to witness. He did everything within his power to earn her forgiveness. His devotion was pitiful. But she, beautiful, soft, alluring, made for love and to be loved, turned into a thing of ice and hate. I've seen the venom of the cobra leap into her eyes when he as much as touched her hand. For over fifteen years this has gone on. Is it any wonder that he took his life?"

Hathaway, who had listened in silence to the other's recital, now said:

"In view of the fact of what you've told me, I would not be human, much less an officer of the law, if I did not suspect this man whom you call Brown."

Hunt smiled.

"Quite so," he replied. "Only Brown has an ironclad alibi. He's dead."

"Oh!

The constable sat sunk in silence for a perceptible period, then he

drew the turquoise ring from his pocket and handed it to the insurance broker.

"Did you ever see that before?" he asked.

Hunt turned the thing over between thumb and forefinger.

"No, I didn't," he replied.

"You never saw Mr. Poole wear it?"

"Never."

"Mrs. Poole told me this morning that she had given it to her husband. It was on his finger when we found him."

A change came over Hunt's face, and as he gave the ring back to Hathaway, his hand trembled visibly.

"I have never seen it before," he repeated.

"One more question, and then I'm done," Hathaway said. "Why do you never call at Soundview Manor except during Mrs. Poole's absence?"

"Because I tried to remonstrate with her once on behalf of my friend. The only result was that she grew to hate me almost as much as she did her husband."

"But wasn't there anyone who could have told her the true state of affairs? Why did you not tell her yourself?"

"No one knew except myself. I found it out only when—Brown came to me one day whining about it in a drunken stupor. His version of the story was, of course, very different from the one Poole told me later, when I faced him down with what I thought was his perfidy. Needless to say, knowing the character of the two men, I believed my friend. I begged him to let me tell his wife the truth, but he would not permit me. He said that no compromise was possible. He would win her on his own merits or not at all. He refused—as he put it—to use another man's downfall to his own advantage."

"I see," said Hathaway arising. "I thank you for your kindness in answering these questions. It helps materially to clear up certain points."

He thought it best not to mention what he had found out about the room in Brooklyn.

V

HE walked back to the railway station, deep in thought. Vague ideas were forming in his mind. He was satisfied that the turquoise ring had never belonged to Poole; also that Mrs. Poole was trying to shield someone. This someone was not the mysterious Brown, her former lover, since he was dead. Who then? And why was Hunt so anxious to have it appear that Poole had committed suicide? And what was the evidence which Hunt had refused to divulge?

It was then that there came to Hathaway an idea, in a flash of inspiration; and it was characteristic of him to act at once upon it. Instead of returning to Rocky Ford, he took the first train back to New York.

The Hudson Life Insurance Company, of which Warren Hunt was president, had its offices in Nassau Street. To this address Hathaway went and representing himself to be a prospect for life insurance, was taken in hand by one of the company's representatives. He discovered that the policies of the Hudson Life did not pay for suicidal death, and that this was the reason for its slightly lower premium rate, as compared with other companies that paid for death from any cause. By a little adroit questioning, and a feigned skepticism about the company's solvency and resources, he secured a printed list of its largest policy holders. He was not surprised to find the name of Douglas Poole prominent on the list, with a

policy for one hundred thousand dollars. He was beginning to see a light! No wonder that Warren Hunt was anxious to have it appear that Douglas Poole had committed suicide!

His next step was to go to the police station and secure a search warrant. Armed with this, he called at the Brooklyn address. The landlady admitted him to Lake's room under protest that was almost abusive. He closed the door upon her and turned the key in the lock. The room was typical of its kind. It contained a single bed, a dresser, two chairs, one of them a rocker, and a wicker-work stand with a glass top upon which lay a pile of cheap magazines of the "confession" type. The faded walls were covered with publicity stills of motion picture actresses and with the standard, semi-nude pictures of chorus girls, a few of them signed in the breezily endearing terms "To my darling Billy," or "To Billy, the best fellow in the world," etc.

In the clothes closet Hathaway found an old suit and a pair of worn-out shoes which, on examination, he discovered were of the same brand as the ones found upon the dead man. There were also some dozen empty gin bottles, but nothing else. In one of the dresser drawers he found a bundle of letters the text of which proclaimed them to be love letters of the lighter kind. All were addressed to "Billy," but no two of them were in the same handwriting, and in not a single instance had the writer used her surname. They were signed simply "Gladys," "Mabel," or "Betty," and were overflowing with extravagant adjectives and more or less maudlin terms of endearment.

Hathaway searched the rest of the drawers in the dresser, but found nothing of importance. There was the usual collection of odds and ends,

a few soiled collars and a discarded necktie or two.

After satisfying himself that further search was useless, the constable left the room, locking the door behind him. As he walked down the stairs he heard voices in the hall below. One of the voices was that of the irascible landlady. At the sound of the other, Hathaway paused in his tracks. He craned his neck over the banister. In the murky hall, directly below him, befurred and chic, stood Mrs. Poole! Hathaway strained his ears. He heard her say a few words, which he was unable to catch, to the frowzy proprietor, then leave hurriedly.

The constable remained standing until he heard an automobile engine which the driver had kept running, pull away, and drive down the street at a high rate of speed.

When he returned the key to the landlady a few moments later, he said:

"Why didn't you send the lady up?"

The woman looked at him covertly.

"I was going to," she said, "but when I told her that a bull was in the room, she beat it."

"Who was she?" Hathaway asked.

"Don't ask me. I never saw her before."

Hathaway regarded the woman in silence for a moment. It was evident by her demeanor that she was telling the truth.

"What did she want?"

"I don't know any more than I know what you want. She asked me when I had seen Mr. Lake last and I told her. When she heard that you was in the room she said: 'Don't tell him that anybody asked for Mr. Lake,' and left. I wouldn't have told you if you hadn't seen her," she added, sourly.

VI

CONFUSED though he was by the bizarre and startling aspects of the case, Hathaway kept his head. One trail was plain, and that led to Warren Hunt. That the insurance man was in the possession of the knowledge that would solve the mystery, there was no doubt in the constable's mind. And that the insurance company was withholding claim seemed obvious.

Once convinced that he was on the right trail, Hathaway lost no time in following it up. Instead of going to the railway station, he hailed a taxi and, giving the driver Hunt's address, told the man to take him to Douglaston as fast as he could drive.

When he arrived there it was dusk. He found the president of the Hudson Life Insurance Company pacing the floor of the livingroom in evident agitation.

"Well, what is it now?" he demanded, irritably.

Hathaway was at a loss how to begin. Diplomacy was not his long suit. Directness and simplicity were his outstanding qualities. Einstein's refutation of the straight-line theory was unknown to him so he came to the point at once.

"How about that hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy of Mr. Poole's?" he asked.

Hunt brought himself up short and flung his hands wide with a gesture of finality.

"So you've discovered about that? I might have known that you would!" he added, glaring at the other belligerently.

"And now that I have, suppose you tell me all you know," Hathaway suggested. "Considering everything it would be awkward for you, and bad publicity for the Hudson Life, to have this thing dragged out of you in court."

Hunt hooked his massive thumbs

into the armholes of his vest. His face was a study in half suppressed fury, incredulity, and something else. When Hathaway informed him of what had taken place in the house at Brooklyn that afternoon, he drew his breath in sharply.

"And you believe that I'm trying to beat a claim!" he ejaculated.

"Under the circumstances what would you have me believe?" Hathaway retorted with some asperity.

Hunt ran his hand across his face as if to brush away the accusation, when the butler entered and informed him that Mrs. Douglas Poole was calling. The insurance man looked at the constable. He seemed to be trying to make up his mind about something, then said:

"All right, Watkins, show her in."

Hathaway sensed that he had reached the end of the trail.

A moment later the small befurred figure of Mrs. Poole stood framed in the doorway. She glanced from one to the other of the two men.

"I thought you were alone," she murmured, addressing Hunt.

"As you see, I'm not, Mrs. Poole," he replied in a hard metallic voice, "but you may speak freely before Mr. Hathaway. He is—the soul of discretion."

The constable searched Hunt's face for a trace of levity, but saw none. It was his turn to be puzzled.

"I have nothing to say," Mrs. Poole replied, haughtily, with a glance at Hathaway. She turned to go, but Hunt put forth a restraining hand.

"Stay!" he said in a voice of command, "I have something to say, and you're going to listen, Ruth Poole!"

He crossed the floor and taking her by the arm forced her to a seat in a chair. He began to speak. His voice was cold and passionless as that of a judge, but deadly in its insistence, and withering with scorn of

accusation. He told her what he had told Hathaway earlier in the day, and he told her more. Once or twice Mrs. Poole made a motion as if to arise and leave, but Hunt forced her to hear him to the end.

"When you thought that your husband had taken his own life after fifteen years of inhuman torture, you had not even a tear of pity, but when you thought that your lover was guilty of murder, your first thought was to warn him," he finished.

The woman rose halfway in her chair. Her face was the color of ashes.

"You do not believe that!" she whispered.

"What other construction do you expect me to put upon your visit to the house in Brooklyn? He indicated Hathaway with a nod.

"You were seen there. And since you knew the address, perhaps you also knew that your husband had been supporting your lover ever since he frittered away the last penny of his inheritance, ten years ago?"

"I didn't know," she replied faintly. "I got the address because Billy wrote me at Beverly Hills, California. He begged me to send him some money. He said that his—source of income had been cut off." She opened her purse and drew out an envelope. "This is the letter. You may read it. I did not answer it."

Hunt waved the letter aside.

"His source of income! That's good! Your husband had refused to be mulcted any longer. He felt that he had already paid more than the price for his—indiscretion. Shall I tell you what happened on that fateful night? Your lover came to Soundview Manor in one last effort to extort money from your husband. He was dirty and unkempt. He had just spent another one of his thirty-day sentences for drunkenness on

Blackwell's Island. Douglas told him to go upstairs and clean up and gave him a suit of clothes. Later there was a scene in the library. Douglas tossed him a trifling sum of money and told him that it was the last."

He paused and glanced at Hathaway.

"The rest should be told by someone else, he said. He crossed to a door in the far side of the room and flung it open. "Come in here," he called out.

There was the sound of a chair being scraped across the floor in the next room and of halting footsteps. Through the door stepped—Douglas Poole. He nodded to Hathaway who stared at him in undisguised amazement, then glanced at his wife who sat in her chair regarding him with an odd, wistful expression, but without the slightest trace of surprise.

"I have told them all, Douglas, except the actual shooting," Hunt said. "Will you tell about that for Mr. Hathaway's benefit."

"There's not much to tell," Poole replied wearily. "When I refused to give my brother any more money, he picked up the gun from the smoking stand and threatened to kill himself. I—God forgive me—told him that he was too much of a coward to take his own life. I had no idea that he would do so. The next moment there was a report and he sank dead at my feet. In the horror of that moment I hardly knew what I was doing. My one object was to escape from it all; the dead man, the hopelessness of my life. The situation was made to order for me. I was alone in the house. My dead brother had on my clothes. We looked exactly alike. He was my twin, you see. Not a man in a thousand could tell us apart. I took everything out of my pockets and put them into his. Then I ran upstairs and changed into his dis-

carded garments. From my wall safe I took what cash I had on hand and some thirty-odd thousand dollars in bearer bonds which I kept there for an emergency."

He paused and glanced at Hunt affectionately.

"I intended to go away to some remote place and start life over again. There was little chance of the truth being found out. My wife was away. My twin brother would be buried as myself. In my excitement I had forgotten that he was left-handed and I overlooked the turquoise ring on his right hand." He gave his wife a pathetic smile. "It was the one you gave him in Constantinople, fifteen years ago, Ruth."

She nodded.

"I knew when I heard that it had been found upon his finger that it was Billy who was dead and not you."

"That's about all," Poole said to Hathaway, "except that I came here to Hunt that night and took him into my confidence. As my friend, and as the underwriter of my life to the extent of a hundred thousand dollars, he was entitled to know the truth. I have been here ever since, awaiting the verdict, before going away. If it hadn't been for your friendship and loyalty, Jim Hathaway, I'd have gotten away with it, and everybody would have been happy."

The constable drew a deep breath. He glanced at Mrs. Poole who had risen from her chair, and stood with her hand extended toward her husband.

"Douglas," she said, softly, "my car is outside. Suppose we go home and see what we can do with the next fifteen years. I know I do not deserve another chance, but I ask it in all humbleness before these two men who are your friends."

Poole did not reply. He merely followed the woman out of the room. In the doorway the two paused.

Poole's hand was on his wife's shoulder. The woman's eyes were brimming with tears. The next moment they had gone.

When the sound of their motor died away in the distance, Hathaway said:

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Hunt. Will you accept it?"

The insurance man winked.

"I'll think it over," he said. He held out his hand. "We owe you a lot more than an apology."

Hathaway shook it, then reached for his hat.

"I must be getting back to the office and make out my report," he said.

To the very many thousand readers of THE BLACK MASK, we are aware it is only sufficient to say

Race Williams

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

He'll be there, all right. "HALF-BREED" is the medium for his coming appearance.

Last month we thought Carroll John Daly had reached a peak in his unusually high standard of detective-adventure yarns. Perhaps he had—up to then.

Now comes

"Half-Breed"

Mr. Daly says it's the best he has yet done.

Coming fast on a rising scale, we'll say—suspense, action and mystery from first to last.

When the November issue is out, you can judge for yourselves.

A KNIGHT'S NIGHT OUT



BY
SARA
HARBINE
WEAVER

BEFORE Howard Stevens had been two hours in his sister's apartment he had seen the red-eyed man. And he had heard faintly through the dumb-waiter shaft a peculiar moaning and sobbing coming from apartment 2A directly beneath him. Before he had been two days in the place he was convinced of a conspiracy and being incorrigibly adventuresome was resolved to ferret out things for himself.

He had left his bachelor quarters on West 57th Street at the urgent request of his sister Paula who was summering in Maine with her family.

"The crime wave is waving all around," she had written, "and I'm getting frightfully uneasy. Won't you take your beloved fiddle and your awful New York Statutes and stay in our apartment while we're away? Most of the burglaries take place where the families, like us, have flitted for a vacation. The house restaurant is very satisfactory and you'll be far more comfortable than in your rooms. And if anything should happen—the burglars burgle or anything like that, being an athlete you'd take care of yourself and being a lawyer

you'd know exactly what to do. But if you go, look the other way when Patricia Nacrosse comes along or you'll lose your adamant heart. She lives on the second floor and I've seen her two or three times but know absolutely nothing about her except that she's worth looking at—forever! Our friends, the Brimmers, next to Nacrosses call them the 'family of purple mystery.' Don't know why except that they keep strictly to themselves and seem to be in some sort of trouble."

Paula had rambled on in her gossipy way and finally had added a paragraph cautioning Howard about keeping the dumb-waiter door locked during the night and while he was at the office. "For," she wrote, "I just read of another robbery in an apartment not two blocks from where we live where the desperate yeggman (that's the name, isn't it?) entered and left by means of the dumb-waiter."

So Howard Stevens nothing loathe, had loaned his rooms to a friend and become the sole occupant of the Clegmore apartment known as 3A. Arriving on a July Saturday when the mercury wavered near ninety-two degrees

he had flung off his outer garments, thrown open the windows and telephoned down to the dining room for a cold supper to be sent up. Concluding that the kitchen, which faced the north, was a degree or two cooler than any other room he lugged a large chair to the window; put a small table in front of it for his promised tray; opened the door to the dumb-waiter shaft with the futile idea of creating a draft; and sat down to await his evening meal.

Then it was that he heard for the first time the uncanny whimpering from the apartment below. "If that weeping keeps up," he informed himself, "I'll have to close the dummy door."

But he did nothing of the sort for he happened to glance out of the window across the court and the thing he saw blotted everything else from his mind. A short black barrel was aimed directly at him.

"I'm being held up," he thought and quickly slid from his chair and dodged into a corner. It came to him, in a flash, that while burglars frequently committed their dark deeds during the dinner hour no one across the court could hold him up and enter the place at the same time. The idea of an accomplice across the court seemed far-fetched.

"The old scout must be crazy," he concluded keeping as near the wall as possible and edging from the kitchen. After a little rummaging he found a pair of opera glasses. In a moment he was back again peering warily out of the window.

"I'll get a look at this wild man," he thought adjusting the lenses. The sight was not entirely reassuring.

The face opposite was far from prepossessing, with red-lidded eyes, a shining bald head and a drooping grey mustache. But the thing Howard had mistaken for a gun was an old-fashioned telescope plainly visible now as it lay lengthwise on the sill.

"Humph," ejaculated Howard, "so there's a red-eyed old man taking an interest in me. Not alone in me," he

added as the telescope was again put into use and this time focussed on the kitchen window of apartment 2A.

"I'll be jiggered," said the young man emphatically for the face opposite had twisted into a malevolent grimace and a bony left hand pounded the sill nervously.

"He must be one plain nut," thought Howard as the apparition withdrew from view. "Lucky Sis didn't see him. Golly! she'd go up in the air! There's the door bell. My dinner, I guess."

Howard ate with relish. Later he dressed and went out for a stroll. He walked westward to the banks of the Hudson.

"Pleasanter here than in a stuffy house," he commented and wandering almost to the water's edge and threw himself on the turf. "This is pretty soft," he said watching the lights of the river craft and gazing at illuminated trolleys climbing the distant Jersey bank. Snatches of song and laughter came from boats on the Hudson and from others cooling off like himself in the park. A couple hours passed swiftly and it was after ten when he entered the Clegmore. The elevator was just going up and he decided to walk the two flights rather than wait for its return.

On the second floor in front of apartment 2A crouched a figure which straightened at his approach and started guiltily away. Obviously, he had been listening at the keyhole or tampering with the lock. As the man was passing him Howard recognized the disagreeable, red-eyed face he had seen before that afternoon and concluding that the fellow must be a crook he acted on impulse.

"Hold on there!" he cried. "What were you doing at that keyhole?"

"It's no concern of yours," snarled the other and with surprising rapidity ran past Howard toward the stairs. But the young man sprang after him and grabbed his shoulder.

"I'm going to make it some concern of mine. As it happens, I'm living in

this house. I'm going to report you to the police."

The old man appeared to gauge his muscular opponent before replying, "you're a fool and a meddlesome matty," he said at last. "I wouldn't bother to answer you, but if I didn't you'd raise an alarm. All right, I was listening at that keyhole. I had a right to be if you want to know. Just ring that door bell and ask 'em if they ever saw me before, and ask 'em if they want me arrested."

"I'll do that very thing," said Howard dragging the furious old man toward the door. No one answered the summons for some time and Howard was on the point of turning away when he heard the rattling of the chain of the night lock. And then, he was staring at a dark-eyed, black-haired girl in an orchid negligee who stood unsmiling before him.

"This fool," snapped the old man shaking himself free of Howard's grasp, "wants to know if you ever saw me before?"

The girl turned a white face toward Howard who explained hurriedly: "I found this fellow at your keyhole. He doesn't look to me like a healthy person to find prowling about at this hour of the night. Say so and I'll have him locked up as a suspicious character."

"Locked up?" cried the girl. "Oh no! You mustn't!"

"He was eavesdropping and he's been spying on you," returned Howard.

"You say he—" she began and stopped in confusion. From a room at the end of the hall had come the sound of hushed voices and Howard's keen ears heard a low sobbing, a despairing, broken-hearted cry.

"You're in trouble!" he exclaimed sympathetically. "I'm mighty sorry to have bothered you. Anything I can do at anytime to help—"

"You're very kind," said the girl looking him full in the face. "You are—" and then catching the glaring look of wrath from the old man's eyes she broke off suddenly.

"She was on the point of telling me something," thought Howard but she didn't want him to hear." This notion gained strength when the girl forcing herself to gaze at the red-eyed man added coldly: "It is true we were in trouble but are no longer." A moaning from the end of the hall seemed to belie her words.

"Ah!" rasped the old man. "We know what your trouble is and it's going to be a darned sight worse before it's better. I'm watching you—"

To Howard's amazement, the girl almost swooning with fright gave a cry of alarm and quickly closed and bolted the door.

"Hope you're satisfied," sneered the peeper making off.

"I'm not!" answered Howard.

It was hours before the young lawyer fell asleep. Why was beautiful Spanish-looking Patricia Nacrosse—for of course this was the girl of whom his sister had warned him—afraid of the old man? And why, if innocent, was she panic-stricken at the very idea of his arrest? She feared an investigation—but why should she if her hands were white? Who was weeping in that handsome apartment? And what was this old red-eyed, bald-headed man so bent on finding out? "Probably," concluded Howard, "he rented that apartment across the court just to be able to watch the movements of the occupants of 2A. And it must be a matter of importance to make him act as he's doing."

Howard went into the kitchen and stole to the window. "Yes, the old fellow's snooping again," he concluded as he made out the vague outlines of a human form crouched in the opposite casement. Then, irrelevantly, he added, "if that girl's a crook she's a darned pretty one. Don't see how she could be yellow with those big, sad eyes but she's afraid of the old nut and no mistake. It's funny business!"

On Monday evening Howard saw Patricia Nacrosse and a black-garbed old lady talking in low tones to the

superintendent of the Clegmore. The girl's face flushed as her eyes met his and she half-smiled, half-frowned in recognition. As for her aged companion she gazed directly at him without apparently seeing his shrewdly humorous face.

The next night Howard went to a house-warming on Long Island and it was two-thirty a. m. when he reached the Clegmore. Near the curb in front of the house stood a long, low car. He glanced at it curiously, wondering whether it belonged to a physician or one on pleasure bent or could it be a housebreaker's? The old peeper might be at work or the mysterious Nacrosses might be doing heaven only knew what! A yawning elevator boy conducted him to the third floor.

Switching on the lights in the hall he went directly to the kitchen. He had a guilty consciousness that he had forgotten his sister's injunctions about locking up. Sure enough! The dumb-waiter door was partly open while its chain hung idle. And the crime wave still waving! He thought of the powerfully-built automobile waiting before his very windows. Perhaps his sister's apartment had been looted through his infernal carelessness! As he leaned forward to adjust the bolt, sounds from the shaft arrested him. There was a dull thud as if something heavy had been plumped into the dumb-waiter, succeeded by a stifled moaning cry.

It flashed into his mind that burglars had imperfectly gagged someone in the apartment below and were now making their getaway via the dumb-waiter. The ropes creaked and a man's voice came to him in a quick whisper. It sounded like, "for God's sake hurry, or there'll be the devil to pay. Careful there!"

Cautiously he peered into the narrow opening. As he had suspected, the dumb-waiter was stationed at the second floor at the Nacrosse apartment. As he watched, it began to descend slowly. He could see the hands on the pulley ropes and from the way they

tugged, knew that the elevator carried a heavy load. Then once more came that strange, sobbing cry he had heard before. Instinctively, he wanted to yell "Stop!" but he had no gun, and to let the criminals know they were observed would merely make them rush their departure. The best thing would be to call Sam, night telephone boy, and hurry to help him intercept the marauders as they left the basement. He ran to the phone but got no response—probably Sam and the elevator boy were off some place, feeding their inner selves.

"It's up to me," he thought, and raced out of the apartment and down the steps two at a time. No one was visible on the first floor, so weaponless and alone, he tiptoed out of the house. As he emerged, two men were coming slowly up the basement steps, carrying a bulky object between them. The size of the burden amazed him. "They've looted the whole place," he thought.

Just as he was about to shout to them to drop their plunder and to put up their hands, the foremost fellow stumbled, lurched forward and sprawled on the pavement, carrying the thing with him.

"Have a care!" cried the other, staggering.

The coverings fell from the object, and the Clegmore's entrance lights shone wanly on the body and the still face of a dead man. With an oath the second man jerked the other to his feet but in the revealing instant Howard had noticed the large nose of the corpse and his dark, upturned mustache. Howard jumped at conclusions—the men were murderers, probably hirelings of the old red-eyed snooper. They were carrying off their victim. He must act at once, and act he did—most rashly. While the men were lifting the body, he stole down the steps and got on the running boards on the far side of their car. Scarcely had he braced himself, grabbed the door-handle and crouched down, when the man who had fallen, the shorter and heavier of the two, started the machine. They went north and then east. At

three a. m. upper New York is as lively as a hibernating bear. It occurred to Howard that a traffic officer or wandering policeman might see him and hold up the car. He rather hoped they would not be arrested for he wanted to see things through. His incurable thirst for adventure was well whetted. "Where are they taking the corpse?" he wondered, clinging to the car. Soon they were crossing the 181st Street Bridge over the Harlem River. Midway the bridge they passed a man and a woman walking. After a time a milk truck lumbered by. They were now in the Bronx and Howard began to feel that he could no longer cling to the car. His muscles ached, but unless he discovered where the men were going, his trouble was for nothing. On the other hand, if he waited until the car stopped and was detected, he might speedily be reduced to nothing. He tried to peer into the machine to get a good look at the occupants, but in the dim light their features were indistinguishable. The taller man supported the corpse on the back seat. Occasionally, he spoke to the driver, but Howard could not understand what he said.

He determined to jump the moment the car slowed down and conceal himself. Those moments were racking ones, for he did not doubt that the men were desperate and would shoot at the drop of a hat. When the machine darted across the road and slackened her speed he leaped off, and after picking himself out of the mud-puddle where he had rolled, he ran and hid behind a rather pretentious cottage, from a downstairs window of which gleamed a light. In a trice, the two men were out of the machine, bearing the body into the house. Then the driver reappeared and drove the car into a garage, near which Howard crouched among some bushes. After this man had again entered the house Howard crept to a window and gazed in. A long, handsomely furnished room was dimly illuminated by a yellow-shaded lamp.

In an alcove the shorter man was telephoning. By his side, her back to Howard, stood a tall woman, whose hair in a long braid fell to her knees, when she turned toward the young lawyer he saw that she was weeping. The man hung up the receiver and with great agitation and what struck Howard as despair addressed a few words to the woman. He then switched off the light. Howard mystified, stood for a moment considering what to do.

Should he report what he had witnessed to the police? Yes, he must at once. These fellows must be hardened criminals, for they had conveyed this body a long distance quietly and quickly with no one, he felt sure, the wiser save himself. The woman had wept, but then women often weep. That old Peeping Tom might be at the bottom of the affair. The sound of an approaching motorcycle spurred him to action. He had but a vague idea as to his whereabouts; was tired all over, and wanted to get home. Evidently a murder had been committed. He could call up headquarters as quickly from his own quarters as from anywhere else at this hour when every place was closed up.

Hatless and covered with mud, Howard ran into the middle of the street and shouted to the cyclist to stop. He dashed by but a half block away, brought his diabolical machine to a standstill and with a foot in the mud on either side, stared back at Howard.

"What's your game?" he asked, as Howard panted up.

He was a huge, black fellow with a comical good-natured face. Howard fished up a greenback and held it toward him with the explanation, "I was out last night and am lost. Want to get home. Two more bucks for you if you take me to The Clegmore, 201 Fort Washington Avenue.

The big fellow looked him over with insolent humor. "Well, hop in the bathtub," he finally grinned. "Guess you've had an overdose of home brew.

Howard let it go at that.

When he got out at The Clegmore, something lying near the tradesman's entrance caught his eye. He picked the thing up. It was a long negligee of orchid silk—the covering that dropped off the dead man. Howard recognized it as the garment the dark-eyed girl had worn when he first saw her. Wadding it under his arm he entered the house. Sam was drowsing at the switchboard and he let him slumber on. At the Nacrosse's door he paused in momentary indecision. All seemed quiet within. It was still before daybreak—New York's millions were sleeping. Yet the cries which he had heard in this apartment were of suffering, and what he had witnessed afterward was enough to arouse the most terrible suspicions. Most men would have telephoned headquarters, called it a night and not concerned themselves further with the inmates of 2A. But Howard felt he must know whether violence had been committed in that apartment. He wanted to be of help if he could. His heart thumped when it occurred to him that disaster might have befallen the girl he had talked to. So he rang the door-bell. Almost immediately a voice came from within.

"Who's there?"

"I—Howard Stevens, from the floor above. A word with you please."

A whispered colloquy ensued. Then the door opened the merest crack through appeared the white face of Patricia Nacrosse. She drew back when she saw him, but he speedily reassured her.

"I'm no house-breaker. Came in late last night, or rather this morning, and I saw and overheard enough to make me fear you people were in trouble. I came to ask if you need assistance. The police—"

"No—no," she broke in, brushing her black hair from her troubled face. "You must be mistaken."

"That can hardly be," he returned, in great perplexity. And he went on

to relate all the happenings, beginning with the sounds in the shaft and ending with his finding the kimono which garment he handed her, saying, "I think this must belong to you. Now, I'm going to telephone the police," he concluded.

An expression of consternation overspread the girl's mobile face and she spoke with intensity.

"You mustn't say a word to any one of all this. Hear me? Will you promise?"

"Why should I?" he returned. "If a wrong has been done it should be reported. The innocent needn't fear an investigation."

She leaned toward him scrutinizing his face. "There's truth in your eyes! Yes, I'm sure I can trust you," she exclaimed. "I suppose the best way out will be to tell you everything." She stopped and considered him for a time longer. Then, "meet me at eight o'clock Friday night—no—not here, on the mezzanine floor of the McAlpin."

"The place is all right but why the delay?" cried the young man all his suspicions coming to a head. "You could be half way across the continent in less time than that if you wanted to escape. You could—" The girl interrupted him, her face flaming. "I'll be there!" she cried. "You've my word for it! Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes," said Howard slowly, "it does, I too, will be there."

He found things intact in his sister's apartment, and after eating a hearty breakfast sent from the house dining-room, he flung himself into bed and slept until midday. In the afternoon law business took him to Albany and it was not until Thursday evening that he got back.

At the switchboard he found Sam, just arrived for night duty and an overmastering desire for tidings of the Nacrosses—made him stop at the desk and drop a greenback into Sam's ecru palm. He started to ask if there had been a sudden death but thought better of it—

perhaps the news of the tragedy had not leaked out. So he inanely enquired: "There's a sick man in the house, isn't there Sam? On the second floor?"

"There was," said Sam.

"Was? What do you mean?"

"Yes," replied Sam casually. "Name of Donald Nacrosse."

"Well!" cried Howard wondering what had happened and how much the darkey knew. "Did he die?"

"No, not yet. He's better. They took him away on a stretcher yesterday morning."

"What's that?" exclaimed Howard astonished.

"Sure thing. To a sanitarium."

"Are you certain?" gasped Howard.

"Sure, I'm certain. They brought him down the elevator and carried him right by here on a stretcher. He was covered up with sheets but he kept his hands moving and he gave an awful windy sigh. They took him somewhere for treatment."

"Did you ever see him before—his face I mean?" asked Howard.

"Yes, once I did. He'd a thin face and a big nose and a black mustache which twisted up."

Howard gave an involuntary exclamation. The face of the dead man taken from the Nacrosse apartment in the eerie morning hours exactly answered this description. But that man was dead irrevocably—entirely! And he was taken away with the utmost stealth. It was impossible that he had come to life, been smuggled back to the Clegmore and taken away in an ambulance to a private sanitarium! Still it was possible that a murder had been committed and another man had been sorely wounded. It was high time the police were notified. Howard stood for a long moment considering the situation and trying to decide what he ought to do.

No telling what he was mixing up in. But the girl was strikingly pretty and appealing and she had begged him so piteously to wait until she could explain

matters. Wait until she could get away, most likely! No, he didn't believe she'd double cross him. Yet everything was mighty suspicious. Still he'd play fair with her—give her a chance if he got jailed for it. He smiled grimly as he pictured himself, a promising attorney of twenty-nine, acting with the impulsive gallantry of a medieval knight. But Howard Stevens was not merely a lawyer—he was a musician and his artistic soul had been touched on the raw by beauty in distress. So although tormented by doubts, he determined to wait and see whether the girl kept her promise.

"If I squeal now," he argued, "I'll be in Dutch. It stands to reason that the authorities ought to have been notified at once if I had any suspicions and what moron wouldn't have had suspicions after seeing what I saw? But the girl may show up. And—since I've waited this long I'll see the thing through!" But he would see this Spanish-looking Patricia Nacrosse first and remove, if possible, his persistent doubts. He turned abruptly to Sam.

"Call up 2A, Sam, and announce me. Say Mr. Howard Stevens wishes to see Miss Nacrosse."

The darkey's broad face broadened into a grin. "I can call up the apartment, all right, but nobody's at home."

"How's that?"

"Because they ain't. The apartment's empty. They've all just moved out. It won't be empty long b'lieve me. Some people are up there now with the boss giving the place the once over."

Astonishment and stabbing disappointment caused Howard to ejaculate somewhat profanely. So the girl had tricked him after all! He was a dupe—a plain everyday fool! With a premonition that the question would prove futile he asked: "Where'd they go?"

"Search me, Mr. Stevens, Boss don't know either. They were queer fish and no mistake."

"So that's that," said Howard hurrying toward the stairs. He found the

door of the Nacrosse apartment ajar. From an inner chamber purred the unctuous tones of the superintendent, extolling the virtues of the place to prospective tenants. So that was it. The Nacrosses had flown. The girl had pledged him to silence and made a get-away! Oh, she was undeniably beautiful, but so was the Russian countess with the propensity for poisoning husbands. Nearly beside himself, Howard strode in and interrupting the superintendent's eulogy demanded the present address of Mme. Nacrosse. The superintendent said he thought she had left the country, but that he had no address. As he turned away, the old man whom Howard had seen with the telescope and later at the keyhole bounded in.

"Where are they!" he yelled, flinging his arms about. And when he was informed that the Nacrosses had left no address, he flew into a rage and stamped his feet. Finally, he snapped at Howard, "do you know where they are?"

"If I do know," the young man replied, "why should I tell you?"

He glared at Howard before replying. "You're one of those damned tight-lipped lawyers. Well, if you know or find out where this Nacrosse family is and tell me, it will be to your advantage. It will be money in my pocket and money in yours. Here's my address." He handed Howard a crumpled envelope with a name on it which made him more puzzled than ever.

Early the next morning Howard went to a clipping agency to try to find out what manner of people the Nacrosses were. He discovered that Donald Nacrosse, reputed wealthy, had been severely injured in a theater disaster three weeks before. Then he rushed to the Bronx and wandered about for hours trying to find the cottage whose inmates he felt sure could furnish a solution to the Nacrosse mystery. The Bronx is as confusing as Brooklyn but finally Howard located the place where the dead man had been carried.

There was a physician's sign near the

front door, so he rang the bell and boldly asked to see Dr. Mansfield. The woman who admitted him had a worried, wearied expression. She bade him wait in the reception room, saying she doubted whether the doctor could see him unless he had made an appointment. Scarcely had he seated himself when the word, "Nacrosse," electrified him into attention. The door between the room in which he sat and the doctor's office was ajar, and the doctor was speaking in crisp, short sentences plainly audible to the uneasy young man.

"Don't lose your nerve," he snapped. Then, in an excited rush came, "you know the laws of New York State, don't you? For heaven's sake, remember 'em and stop talking. You've swallowed the camel, man. I'll be right down." There was a pause, and then as if in answer to a query, "the grave? The grave's sealed." Howard ran a sinewy brown hand through his hair. "Guess it wasn't a dream after all," he said.

A moment later, the doctor called out to the woman, "got to see that cub or he'll queer everything. Good-bye." He fairly ran from the house and the woman, whom Howard presumed was his wife, made his excuses.

"The doctor has had an urgent call." She looked at him and at the partially-open door and her face paled.

Howard walked toward the entrance and on a sudden impulse said, "please tell the doctor a detective called."

"Oh!" she gasped. "You're not from headquarters?"

He felt a quick compunction and added, "no, I'm not a regular sleuth—just a self-appointed one."

Her eyes met his squarely. "I can't imagine why you should interest yourself in our affairs, but I beg of you to make no report to the police. Because of shadow white may look black. A partial truth is often most damaging. Oh, please say nothing to any one!"

"I'll do nothing rashly," he answered and hurried away.

It seemed to him that the time to meet

the girl at the McAlpin would never come. Would she be there he kept asking himself or had she merely suggested the rendezvous to keep him quiet and give her and her allies time to cover their tracks and clear out?

Howard resolved to untangle the knot, if possible, for himself. He tabulated his facts and tried one explanation after another. He called up the superintendent of the Clegmore and the superintendent of the building, where the peculiar old man lived and obtained information from them both. He tried to piece things together and all the time kept wondering whether the girl would meet him. Had he, a lawyer, done right to keep silent for days? From six until eight seemed an eternity. One moment he felt sure she'd be there, the next moment he felt equally convinced that he had been made an easy dupe. At last, he could stand it no longer, but hurried off to the hotel, arriving half an hour before the appointed time.

The moments dragged. Finally eight o'clock arrived, eight fifteen, but no Patricia Nacrosse. Still he waited although the suspense had become agonizing. At eight twenty-five she came quietly in and Howard rose quickly and without a word walked to her side. She murmured something about being "unavoidably detained" and suggested that they walk up Broadway.

"Uncle Donald used to say," she said, "that if you want to tell secrets and the Sahara's not handy, to choose the most public place possible where, surrounded by thousands, you will be unnoticed." Presently she sighed and asked, "shall I explain matters?"

"Give me a try at it first," he answered and pitched in. "The red-eyed old man with the telescope is Robert Nacrosse, your grandfather, the husband of Madame and the father of Donald, your uncle, who died last week. All of which sounds like the Book of Genesis, but finishes our genealogy."

"You're both right and wrong," she

interrupted. "Madame Nacrosse, my grandmother, was twice married. My mother, her only child by her first husband, died when I was a baby and grandmother who raised me called me Nacrosse although I am not related to her second husband, Robert Nacrosse. The other particulars you have quite right. I don't know where you learned these things."

"Old Mr. Nacrosse gave me his name and address and the rest of the statistics I gleamed from two house superintendents and a clipping bureau."

"But when you saw poor Uncle Donald taken away, you believed he had been murdered?"

"Yes, it certainly looked like it. But after I had talked with you and with the doctor's wife, I thought differently. It was obvious that you both knew the facts, and it also seemed pretty obvious to me that you were not criminals. Yet there must have been strong motive actuating men who carried a body down a dumb-water and made off with it. Naturally, I thought of money, the root, oftentimes the fruit, of evil. It was self-evident that for some reason a man's death was to be concealed. From Sam I learned that a sick man, *covered with sheets* and supposed to be Donald Nacrosse had been taken away in an ambulance. That puzzled me I admit. At first I thought one man had been murdered and another badly hurt and you were keeping the whole thing secret. Then after reading of Donald Nacrosse's injury and of his wealth I concluded he had died and you people were moving heaven and earth to keep his father from knowing it. Another man had even impersonated your uncle. Since I had eliminated murder and the concealing of the victim in order to enable the murderers to escape, and had concluded that the man had died a natural death and for the sake of money his death was to be kept secret, the next step was easy. Being a lawyer, I at once thought of inheritance. A mental infant, after hearing old Mr. Nacrosse rant, would have

known that something was eating him. And when I discovered from the newspaper clippings that his son, Donald, was reputed a millionaire, naturally I thought of the decedent estate law which would fit the case. When a son dies intestate, leaving both parents, the father inherits all the property, real and personal. But what I can't understand is how old Mr. Nacrosse got the idea that his son was dying intestate? He must have suspected it, or why did he rent the furnished apartment across from the Clegmore and act as he did? Most rich men leave wills. And how did Madame Nacrosse happen to know, what we must presume she knew, namely, that her son's property would all go to his dissolute father? Why did she not persuade him to write a will so that you and his old mother, wouldn't be left penniless?"

"You're wonderful!" cried the girl. "I wouldn't have believed it possible for anyone to work things out like that. But the things which puzzle you are simple enough. Uncle Donald settled a sum of money on his father so that the old man need never be in actual want. But he drank and gambled and was in want much of the time. Uncle Donald went to him in an attempt to make the old fellow lead a better life. But step-grandfather refused, and was so hateful that Uncle tore up his will and told him, Steppie, that he needn't expect anything further from him. Uncle Donald came home and informed grandmother and me that he would see that Steppie had enough to live on the rest of his days. He said he was going to write another will and not leave his father a cent outright to squander on drugs. Then Uncle went to the theatre and as you know got fatally hurt. A rumor went around that he was dead. Steppie heard it and at once consulted a lawyer to find out how he stood in regard to Uncle's property, and the heartless old man

actually came and demanded grandmother to hand everything over to him. When grandmother informed him that their son still lived, he showed no elation but marched away and sub-letting an apartment across the street, spied upon us. Uncle died without recovering consciousness, but it would have been cruel to him and to poor grandmother, unjust all around, to let his unnatural parent inherit his entire estate."

"Were you sure the doctor and the other man would say nothing?"

"Absolutely. The doctor is related by marriage. The other man is my father's younger brother. He it was who impersonated my uncle and was carried out on the stretcher. But he is excitable, and Dr. Mansfield has had to be severe with him. We've had an awful time with him and with grandmother who went to pieces. You must have heard her crying — poor soul. Uncle was buried from the doctor's house. No notice was sent to the newspapers. We sail tomorrow for France, and grandmother insists that her lawyers look after Steppie's welfare and advance him what he needs from time to time. But possession is nine points of the law, and her lawyers assure grandmother that even if Steppie discovered our whereabouts, he can never successfully claim Uncle's money."

"If this were the year 1922 instead of 1921," broke in Howard, "you'd not have had all this trouble. They're going to pass a bill in Albany making parents joint heirs of children dying intestate. The circumstances in this case are most peculiar."

"Yes," she admitted, "they are. But of course we hoped to keep all of this in the family."

"Well," said Howard boldly, "I'm not in the family but I'd like jolly well to be!"

The frown which accompanied her blush ended in a smile.

A BREATH OF SUSPICION



BY
CYRIL J.
CONRAD

BOB CRENSHAW turned away from the window, trying to shake off the pensive mood into which he had fallen, and sought to attract the attention of Jim Archbold. Archbold was laughing immoderately at a remark of Horace Garry's, and the laugh sounded forced and unnatural to Crenshaw's ears. Garry, an unsuccessful suitor for the hand of Elinor Colby, was doing his best to distract the minds of the girl and her mother from contemplation of that other scene, now taking place in the library. Poor Jim, never a brilliant conversationalist, was trying to lend a helping hand and was failing miserably.

Crenshaw's lips curled in a wry smile. But for Garry the situation would be tense, indeed, for Mansfield Mills was almost as bad as Archbold. Mills looked on, but seldom spoke. His slender fingers dallied with a monocle, and occasionally he twisted uneasily in his chair. He evidently did not relish the situation.

But, Crenshaw mused, he did not

relish it himself. Instead, he found himself resenting the mission connected with Walter Harmon's unexpected arrival. That young man had displayed a gross lack of consideration for the guests, but, Crenshaw shrugged, a young man in love is apt to be temporarily deranged, so Harmon's action was probably pardonable.

Still, there was something peculiar about it. He felt a vague uneasiness he could not define. If it were not downright rudeness, he would go back there to the library and satisfy himself that all was well. He knew Joseph Temple. The old man could be a human devil when he was crossed.

At last Archbold glanced up and caught his signal. A moment later he joined Crenshaw at the window.

"This affair is getting on my nerves," Crenshaw whispered guardedly. "I don't more than half like the idea of those men being together so long in their present frame of mind. Harmon at least. He looked wild enough for anything, and you know what Temple is like."

Archbold nodded. "Yes, but I think the boy was only nervous. Walter is sane enough, but he is frantic over the possibility of losing Elinor, and he knows it won't be easy to overcome the old man's antipathy. I don't know why he objects to Harmon, but he does—and that's reason enough for Joe Temple."

"Temple is a contemptible cur," Crenshaw averred angrily. "He has made a slave of his daughter for years, and now the granddaughter is to be a victim. I wonder if there is one real human feeling left in his old hulk."

"Doubtful. He's had Mrs. Colby under his thumb because she had her daughter's future to consider, and he took ample advantage of that fact. Now it looks as if Elinor is going to stick staunchly to her mother in case Harmon fails."

"I admire her for that, but I think it's a confounded crime," Crenshaw said. "Walter is a good boy and he isn't getting a square deal. There was fire in his eyes tonight. Temple can drive him too far."

"Yes, but I guess you or I, or even your friend Mr. Mills, would put up some kind of an argument if we thought our future depended on it, and I wouldn't think much of the boy if he didn't stand by his guns after the first rebuff. To tell the truth, I've been more interested in this friend of yours. Where did you dig him up, and did you by any chance ever see him stick that piece of glass in his eye?"

Crenshaw laughed. "Since you mention it, I don't think I ever saw him try to look through the thing, but he seems to have a lot of fun tossing it about. Peculiar cuss, isn't he?"

"He's all of that. Who or what is he?"

"I refuse to commit myself. He was introduced to me at the club

and seems to have a lot of friends. I understand he is an American, but has spent the greater part of his life in London, where he was employed by New Scotland Yard."

Archbold surveyed the dapper form of Mansfield Mills for a moment and then turned quizzical eyes on Crenshaw.

"In what capacity?" he asked drily.

Crenshaw laughed again. "Your question is something like Garry's remark. He ventured the guess that they might have let Mills keep the books or answer the bell."

"Probably opened doors for visitors," Archbold snorted scoffingly. "That bird never had sense enough to keep books."

At the moment Mansfield Mills was staring vacantly at the wall, slender white fingers toying absently with the monocle, his placid eyes devoid of expression. Once he flicked a speck of dust from the mirror-like tip of a boot, and several times he seemed to be on the verge of yawning. Archbold sniffed angrily.

"If he yawns, I'll be tempted to pitch him out the window," he muttered.

"He won't," Crenshaw chuckled. "From what I've seen of him, I think he'll look bored at his own funeral." Then he became suddenly serious. "I don't intend to put up with this uncertainty any longer, Jim. I'm going to suggest that one of us go back there and—well, just satisfy ourselves that everything is all right."

Mrs. Colby and her daughter were still listening to Horace Garry, who was still talking animatedly; but for all of her pretended interest, Elinor could not restrain an impulse to glance toward the door at every slight sound, and it was obvious to Crenshaw that she was exceedingly nervous. Glancing up as he approached, she smiled wanly, and her first words indicated a disquietude

that showed plainly enough where her thoughts had been.

"I do wish Walter would return," she breathed tremulously. "Perhaps I am too easily alarmed, but I can't help feeling a little fearful. It would be dreadful if they should quarrel again."

"Do you think one of us should go back and—sort of reconnoiter?" Crenshaw asked with an encouraging smile. "I don't think it is at all necessary," he lied, "but if they are not talking loudly it will set your mind at rest."

"Someone might go back and listen a moment," Mrs. Colby suggested with a nervous little laugh, "but I don't think we should intrude."

Crenshaw understood. Old Joe Temple would resent the least interference and it might serve to wreck whatever hope Walter Harmon had.

Archbold also grasped the significance of Mrs. Colby's advice. "Why not let Garry go?" he said. "He is a friend of both, and is less likely to be regarded as an intruder than any of us."

Horace Garry rose at once. "I'll be glad to go, just to satisfy you nervous folks, but I'll probably find them as thick as a couple of bugs in a rug." With a light laugh, he strode out of the room without further delay.

Both women sighed with relief as Garry disappeared, though Mrs. Colby tried valiantly to mask the fear that was in her eyes. She patted Elinor's hand reassuringly, and Crenshaw wondered if she felt any of that reassurance herself.

Nobody bothered to address a remark to Mansfield Mills. He had displayed no interest in Garry's mission and had kept his eyes lowered, his thoughts, if he had any, apparently far away. Occasionally his shoulders would rise as if he were about to yawn. Ordinarily such

conduct in a guest would be resented, but the minds of Mrs. Colby and her daughter were so occupied that they had not noticed. Crenshaw, who had sponsored Mills, was thankful for that, and he mentally resolved to "ditch" the boor at the first opportunity.

There came a sound of a door being opened down the hall, and even Mansfield Mills displayed a mild interest, though his eyes lacked the look of expectancy that was in the others.

The next instant Elinor cried out and clutched her mother, who had fallen back against the cushions. Crenshaw and Archbold were on their feet, staring. Mills did not rise, but the monocle was tapping faster than ever. In the doorway stood Horace Garry, alone, and he was pointing over his shoulder, trying to speak, but emitting only unintelligible sounds. There was a look of stark terror in his eyes.

Crenshaw was at his side in an instant, shaking him. "Come, come, man, what is it? What do you mean?"

Garry gulped and thrust his head in the direction of the library. Archbold was already dashing into the hall.

"Temple," Garry at last enunciated with difficulty. "Something's happened. I don't know—I wasn't sure—"

Mrs. Colby fainted with a low moan. Elinor was silent, but horror was in her eyes. Crenshaw understood that the real significance of the situation had already penetrated her mind, and he wondered if, perhaps, she had expected some such culmination to Harmon's meeting with the old man.

He turned to where Mills had been sitting, to ask him to remain with the women, but the chair was vacant. In the hall, he saw that Mills was already with Archbold at

the library door. They flung it open.

The body of Joseph Temple lay sprawled on the floor behind the desk. Protruding from the back of the neck was the handle of a very slender knife. Crenshaw shrugged off a feeling of nausea and bent over the body. Archbold stood still, open-mouthed. Mills glanced idly about the room. Crenshaw did not move the body, but a prolonged examination was not necessary.

"Murdered!" he muttered. "Stricken from behind while he sat in his chair at the desk. Cold-blooded murder!"

"Cowardly," Archbold shivered.

"Yes, in more ways than one. Only a coward could wantonly murder an old man, but it was doubly so to strike him from behind."

"If you will pardon a suggestion," the voice of Mansfield Mills came in a slow drawl, "it was hardly fear of the old man that caused the murderer to strike from the rear. I should say it was because he had to commit the deed in a swift and noiseless manner, to avoid an outcry."

Crenshaw and Archbold exchanged swift glances. "In that case, we have to assume that the murderer was aware of our presence in the house," Crenshaw mused.

"Probably, but not necessarily," Mills answered slowly. "He might have feared servants, though he could easily have discovered that there were visitors. Yes, I think he knew," he added abstractedly, his eyes traveling lazily from one object to another.

"But you don't think that anyone from outside did it, do you?" Archbold interposed quickly, and immediately regretted the question. Its implication was obvious.

"It would seem to be impossible. The windows and the door are the only means of ingress and egress, the single door to the room being the one through which we entered

from the hall. The murderer must have entered there, for, although the windows are behind the chair in which the old man sat, the catches are both fastened on the inside, you will observe."

Mansfield Mills tapped his lips with the monocle in a gesture of drowsy lassitude. Even murder had failed to perturb his tranquil serenity.

But his statement was true. Both windows were fastened on the inside. The murderer had entered at the door!

"We might as well face this thing squarely," Crenshaw said with deep regret. "We know that only one man had the opportunity. I hate to think it, but the chances are that the old man drove Harmon mad, and he struck him down in a fit of violent anger. Temple was capable of anything, but he went too far and it cost him his life."

"Perhaps," Archbold agreed, "but I don't think we should be hasty in reaching a conclusion."

Crenshaw glanced quickly at Archbold as he noticed the peculiar inflection in Jim's voice; then he nodded in understanding. They were friends of Harmon's, there was Elinor Colby to consider, and every moment of delay favored the murderer. Harmon should have his chance.

"Better go back and see that the women do not come to this room," Crenshaw said to Archbold. "Tell Garry to come over."

"It will be necessary to inform the authorities, I suppose," Mansfield Mills interposed softly.

Crenshaw frowned. "I'm handling this," he rejoined testily. "I'll call them in good time."

Mansfield Mills' brow arched a trifle as he turned to the desk and idly glanced at the articles upon it, then at the chair in which the murdered man had sat. Turning, he let

his eyes rest on a decanter and two glasses that stood on a small table. He took up both of these, smelled them, and then put them back down and turned away, his gaze directed to the door, through which Horace Garry now entered.

Garry had recovered somewhat from the shock, but he stopped in the door and peered at the huddled form behind the desk.

"Archbold said you needed me over here or I should not have returned," he declared with a shudder. "It's appalling, particularly since Mr. Temple led me to believe that he was softening toward Walter. This is my first experience with violent death, and I can't say that I am going to be very keen about it in the future."

Crenshaw nodded. He felt the same way. "I just wanted you to tell me the circumstances surrounding your finding of the body from the moment you left us until you returned."

"I'll sit down first, if you don't mind," Garry replied, dropping into a chair. "This thing has bowled me over. When I left you, I came down the hall to the door of this room and listened. I had expected to hear voices, and I might say I was afraid they would be harsh ones, for Walter had gone to the old man in a very bad humor. But I didn't hear a sound. I thought that queer, but perhaps due to a temporary cessation of hostilities, so I waited. I must have stood at the door for five minutes, and not a sound came from behind it.

"I wondered at that. I can't tell you that I suspected or feared anything definite, but the thought entered my mind that there was something wrong. I didn't immediately enter even then. You remember Mrs. Colby's warning? But at last I could not stand it any longer and I grasped the knob. At that

moment I had a hunch. Perhaps that sounds queer, but I really had a feeling that I should find—just what I did find."

"You didn't touch the body?"

"I should say not! I didn't go near it. One glance was enough for me, and then I ran back to you. I can't say that I had any love for Temple, but it was pretty horrible, just the same."

"Did you see Walter Harmon in the hall before you opened the door?"

"No, I didn't see anybody. I—of course, I know that you suspect Walter, under the circumstances, and I don't mind telling you that I should have helped him escape, if I had seen him, but I didn't see him. I'm glad he got away."

Crenshaw smiled. The same thought had been in his own mind. Mills was paying no attention. He was too busy polishing his monocle.

Archbold suddenly appeared in the door. He was extremely agitated. Without a word he signed for them to follow him and they obeyed. Half way down the hall Archbold, who was leading, came to a halt and the others drew up behind him. The front door was slowly opening. The next moment Crenshaw and Garry gasped in unison. Standing in the now open door was Walter Harmon.

"I saw him outside," Archbold whispered, "but I didn't think he would come in."

Harmon was hatless and on his face was a look of utter dejection. His shoes were soiled, his hair rumpled, and there were black marks on his face where he had been rubbing it with a grimy hand. He regarded the group before him in silence. Garry started forward, but Crenshaw laid a restraining hand on his arm.

Without a word Harmon walked past them into the room where they had all been gathered but a short

time before. Elinor had taken her mother away. He stopped in the middle of the room and looked around dully.

"Elinor," he said. "She's upstairs?"

Crenshaw nodded.

"Then—she knows I failed?"

Crenshaw nodded again. The man was on the verge of collapse, he knew.

Harmon sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "He wouldn't even listen to me, Bob. He ordered me out. I tried to argue with him, I pleaded, went down on my knees to him, and he ordered me out! I—I could have killed him."

"Did you?" It was the voice of Mansfield Mills, carelessly suave and placid, and Crenshaw turned on him with a cry of rage. He looked as if he might tear the man apart, but Mills' attention was directed to the carpet at his feet and he gave no heed. Crenshaw turned away in disgust.

The question had reached Harmon's ears, however, and he drew himself erect with a start.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked sharply.

Crenshaw intervened before Mills could reply. "Mr. Temple has been murdered," he said reluctantly, though his eyes were intent on Harmon's face, on which was pictured in a quick panorama, relief, concern, disbelief, consternation. He cried out.

"But that's impossible. I left him—" He hesitated, glanced quickly around at the circle of faces, and his eyes opened wide in amazement and indignation. "Am I to understand that you think I did it? That I killed Temple?" he demanded.

Neither Crenshaw nor Archbold could meet his eyes. Garry had turned away.

"You were the only one who had

been in the room with him, Walter," Crenshaw said softly.

"But I didn't kill him—I didn't. I—I felt like killing him, right enough, but I would never have raised a hand against him. Why, he was a doddering old man."

"Without a strong motive, Walter, I couldn't think you would do it," Crenshaw said kindly, "but since you admit that he wouldn't listen to you and even ordered you out—"

"What of it?" Harmon almost shrieked. "What could I gain by killing him? Do you think I could go to Elinor with that old man's blood on my soul?"

"Such a defense in court would be absurd, Walter. You must realize that. You were in a very determined frame of mind when you went in to see him, although I have no doubt that you tried to reason with him, but you both became excited, there was probably a hot argument, and he ordered you out of the house and told you not to return. I can understand your state of mind then, Walter. You were driven mad. I don't think you were entirely responsible—"

Harmon's eyes blazed and his fists clenched aggressively as he interrupted. "What are you trying to do, stick this on me with your crazy suppositions? I tell you I left the old man sitting at his desk. You say nobody was in the room after that. How do you know? The hall door was not locked."

"It is improbable that anyone could have left the room in that manner without some of us seeing or hearing him."

"Why did we not hear him, then?" Mansfield Mills asked dully.

Crenshaw glared at him, as if resenting the interruption. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

Mills' reply was mildly sarcastic. "Why, the murderer could hardly have walked through the walls, and the windows were fast, so he must

have entered and left by the door. Isn't it strange that we did not hear him?"

Crenshaw flushed. "We were assuming that Walter—had—" he faltered and did not complete the sentence.

"Even so," Mills continued, "he had to leave the room, because he surely was out of it, out of the house, in fact. He could not have gone more silently than anyone else. If we did not hear Mr. Harmon leave, it seems possible that another person may have also been in that room."

Harmon sighed in evident exasperation. "There is no mystery in how I left the room and the house. I merely walked through the French window onto the lawn. They were not locked. Both were standing open."

Crenshaw shook his head, signifying utter lack of belief in Harmon's statement. There was a lugubrious look on Archbold's face.

"I wondered why the windows should be closed at this time of year," the voice of Mills persisted. He seemed to be musing aloud. "It is rather warm."

Crenshaw sniffed angrily. "Yes, it's warm, and windows should be open, but these particular windows were not open. You made the discovery that they were locked yourself, and men do not leave rooms through locked windows."

"The windows were open, I'll swear it," Harmon protested.

"And all of us would have to swear that they were locked, so who would believe your unsubstantiated claim?" Crenshaw insisted.

Harmon's jaw snapped. "Do you want to convict me of this thing?" he demanded fiercely, his eyes boring Crenshaw.

"God forbid. I just want to show you how easy it will be to convict you on the available evidence, circumstantial, but damning. Some-

thing must be done. I wish you had not returned."

"I'm innocent. Why shouldn't I return? Running away would have been an admission of guilt—and I'm not guilty."

He searched the faces before him for some sign of faith and encouragement, but it was in vain. There was only doubt and misgiving to see.

"Isn't it possible that the murderer was hidden in the room all the time I was there?" he asked suddenly. Or could he have slipped in at the window after I went out?"

"Where could he have hidden?" Crenshaw asked drily. "Or how could he have got out without being heard, since he did not leave through locked windows?"

"Mr. Temple could have locked the windows after I left the room, or the murderer himself could have done it," Harmon suggested hopefully.

"That still implies that he left by the door," Crenshaw objected, "and I'm almost willing to swear that nobody came out of that door."

Harmon fell back with a little gasp of despair. His last hope had died almost before it was born. Archbold laid a hand on his shoulder. There were tears in the big man's eyes.

"If I might suggest," the voice of Mansfield Mills again interposed apologetically, "it was no vandal that killed Mr. Temple. It was someone he greeted as a friend, because he brought out a second glass and had given his visitor a drink from the decanter."

The look that Crenshaw turned on him was deadly. "It will not be necessary for you to remember that," he commanded stiffly. "It is not our duty to offer suggestions to the police. Let them find their own clues. The situation is bad enough now."

Harmon had jerked back his head at Mills' remark. There was a hopeful light in his eyes again.

"Mr. Temple would not have offered me a drink," he said, "because he knew that I have never tasted liquor in my life."

"That's right," Horace Garry put in hastily, "Walter does not touch anything intoxicating. Archbold, you know that."

Archbold nodded. He knew Harmon was a teetotaler.

"Of course," Crenshaw agreed, "I had forgotten for the moment." Then turning to Mills: "Walter did not drink with Mr. Temple," he scowled.

Mansfield Mills was tapping his lips with the monocle. "I don't think I said that he did," he drawled lazily. "There is one bothersome question, though. Why did you go out the window?" he asked Harmon.

"Isn't it obvious? I could not go back there to Elinor in my frame of mind, defeated. I wanted to walk, to think, to get away—so I went out into the grounds and wandered about. Look at me!"

His clothing was in sad disarray, and his shoes and trouser bottoms testified mutely to the fact that he had walked through the dew-laden grass, but it appeared from the lack of interest in Mills' eyes that he was not impressed.

"You don't want to believe me," Harmon cried wildly.

"Buck up, Walter," Garry entreated, an arm about his shoulders, "they are trying to help you, and you must—"

Harmon tossed his head in derision. "Bah! They've all condemned me in their minds. They think I'm guilty as hell."

Crenshaw grasped his hand quickly. "Walter, it makes no difference what circumstances compel me to think, I will do anything I can to help you. I want you to know that."

"That goes for me, too," Archbold said warmly.

"Thanks. You'll help me, but you

won't believe me," Harmon sneered. "Have you called the police?"

"No," Crenshaw replied, "I assumed the responsibility for the delay. You see, we had thought you were gone—"

A light of understanding broke over Harmon's face as Crenshaw hesitated. "You thought I was making my escape," he said slowly. "Thanks for that. It was good of you."

"I am afraid, though, that we can't delay much longer," Crenshaw said regretfully. "As it is, there will be some explaining to do; We must call them soon."

A slight frown gathered on the face of Mansfield Mills for the first time, but it quickly melted away when he heard Garry say:

"There is no phone. Someone will have to drive in."

"Why not all of us?" Harmon asked. "They will only take me in later, anyhow."

"If I might suggest," Mansfield Mills ventured quietly, "I think you would do well to remain here, since they would probably bring you back for the investigation."

The suggestive inflection in his voice overcame whatever objection Harmon might have made, and Walter glanced at him queerly, Mills' eyes, however, were again downcast.

"If you gentlemen will accompany me," Crenshaw said to Mills and Archbold, "my car is at the door. Garry, I think you should remain with Walter. As his closest friend, you will probably wish to do that."

"Going to put a watchman on me while he is gone," Harmon said to Archbold. "Garry would be more apt to let me escape than hold me—but I don't want to escape. I'm not guilty."

Archbold did not tell Harmon his own opinion, which was that Crenshaw was purposely providing a means of escape together with the

assistance of a friend, at some risk to himself. It was a strange proceeding, but these men were friends of Harmon and they did not question Crenshaw's action. As they were about to leave, they discovered that Mills had disappeared, but he returned in a moment with the remark that he thought it best to turn out the library lights and had done so. Then the three men left the house.

Once outside, Mills stopped abruptly. "My gloves," he muttered, and without further excuse, turned back into the house. It was a good five minutes before he returned.

A quarter of an hour later three dark forms were creeping through the shrubbery of the grounds toward a window of the room in which Joseph Temple had been murdered. Once they stopped to survey the dark hulk of the house that rose in the gloom before them.

"I feel like an idiot," a voice whispered. "This is the craziest thing I've ever been guilty of doing. Why can't you explain what's up? This business of imitating an angleworm doesn't appeal to me at all."

"Nor me," whispered the second figure. "We will probably waste a lot of time and have nothing for our pains. I can't see what you hope to accomplish aside from the ruination of our clothing."

"Explanations will be made in due time," the third voice said. "I promised you action and you shall have it. Just use that flashlight as I instructed, and be careful."

The others grunted a protest, but followed the leader until they were under one of the windows. Then they took separate positions, one on each side of the window and the third directly in front of it.

They waited in silence for some time and there had been no move. Then there came a light scratching sound on the window.

The hand of the man in the center

went up and grasped the frame, swinging it open. At the same instant he leaped through with a savage cry, followed by one of his companions. The third man rose quickly and flashed a light into the room.

Its rays fell on the figures of two struggling men, a long, slender knife gleaming in the hand of one. In that instant the other man caught the knife hand of his antagonist, snapped it downward, and with a quick twist of his hip, sent the other hurtling through the air, to fall in a heap on the floor. At the same time the beaten man gave a terrible shriek of agony and the other drew back with a cry of astonishment.

Then the lights flashed on, disclosing Jim Archbold at the wall switch, Crenshaw holding the flashlight, and Mansfield Mills standing stupidly over the fallen figure, beneath which a pool of blood was forming. Crenshaw bent over, as Walter Harmon, wild eyed, dashed into the room.

"My God," Crenshaw exclaimed, his face suddenly white, "it's Horace Garry! He is wounded."

"Yes," Mills nodded, "the man went crazy when he saw he was caught. He fell on the knife when I threw him there. Is he badly injured? Will you phone for a doctor, please?" he said to Archbold.

"There is no phone," Jim reminded him. "I'll drive in."

Mills shook his head. "Better find a phone and save time. I don't think it advisable to move Garry before a doctor arrives. Phone police headquarters and they will bring their own medical examiner."

"But what is it?" Harmon asked in bewilderment as Archbold departed. "I don't understand—"

He was interrupted by a moan from the man on the floor. They placed him on a couch and worked over him for some minutes in an effort to stifle the flow of blood. At

length, when they had done all they could for him, they turned away.

Crenshaw shook his head dubiously. "He will die, if I know anything about wounds."

"It may be best that way."

Garry, now conscious, heard Mills' answer.

"It is best—this way," he said with difficulty. "At least, I cheat—the chair. How did you—know?"

"Because," Mills answered, "two men drank from those glasses, and if Harmon did not drink, then you did, for you were the only one who had the opportunity. You hated Harmon for winning the girl, though you pretended friendship, and you never gave up hope of acquiring the Temple fortune. You admitted that Temple told you he was softening toward Harmon, and you were sure that Walter would have gained the old man's consent tonight if he had approached him properly, so you imagined he would eventually succeed. That spelled ruin for you. To murder Temple would prevent him from giving his consent, and it would remove Harmon by way of the electric chair, leaving the field wide open to you, not to mention the vengeance you cherished. Am I wrong?"

"No," Garry replied weakly, "but the vengeance—should be—first." Walter Harmon drew back in dismay as he began to understand the significance of this scene. "I was crazy—mad. Still—I don't see—"

"It was clear to me that another man had been in this room," Mills continued when Garry's voice faltered, "because someone used that glass and nobody came out that door. You said you stood outside the door for five minutes, but we had only

your word for that. Also, you assured us that nobody left the room by the door, but the murderer could not have left in any other manner, and it was evident to me that Temple had been killed within a few minutes of our arrival in the room. Before I left the house I extinguished the lights. Later I returned to the house, ostensibly for my gloves, but really to have a short chat with you. I told you that the murderer's finger prints would undoubtedly be on the knife and on the glass. That frightened you, as I imagined it would, and it also suggested to you the immediate necessity of removing them. I had anticipated such a move. In fact," he said to Crenshaw, "that is why I made the suggestion to Garry and then asked you and Archbold to accompany me. You will find the glass in his pocket. My mistake was in not entering sooner. The accident, of course, I could not have anticipated."

Garry nodded slowly. "You had it—figured out—right. I fell—into the trap—like a monkey. It's only justice—that I should die—by the same knife—" The tense form of the man collapsed in an inert heap. He was unconscious again.

As Walter Harmon looked on, speechless with stupefaction and relief, Crenshaw slapped Mills on the back. "Well, you've certainly surprised me," he said, "but I want to know how you doped this thing out. That's the only mystery left."

Mills reached nervously for his monocle. "Been doing it seven years in the C. I. D. They elevated me from the bookkeeping department," he said blandly as his eyes wandered to Crenshaw's suddenly flushed face.



SO SPAKE the PROPHET



THE Great Spiegel, self-sloganed "Master of the minds of men in whose brain are locked the secrets of the past, the present and the future," curved a forefinger around the solitary dime in his trousers pocket and wondered whether he should invest it in the bag of granulated tobacco his nerves craved or the bowl of soup his appetite demanded.

Spiegel might have consulted the crystal ball which lay swathed in his red sateen turban and robe—his sooth-saying garments—in the battered suitcase beside him. But he did not. Spiegel was a seer for revenue only. The revenue, however, had not been of a quantity commensurate with his prophetic activities. His contract with the most recent traveling theatrical organization with which he had been associated was verbal and it had developed that his salary was in keeping with the form of the agreement. Prophets, it has been said, are without honor in their own country. Here was one without a job in a strange land.

The freight train came to a riotous halt. Spiegel peered from the door of the box car in which he was the only

passenger. No railroad men were in sight. Neither was the village marshal of Cactus Junction. The train crew, in fact, was in the ticket office attempting, by means of a pair of bounding cubes, to separate the agent from the remnants of his salary and the marshal was umpiring the argument. The trainmen had annexed the marshal's salary during a pause at Cactus Junction during the "down" trip the previous day.

So Spiegel was unobserved as he slipped from the car to the ground and, dragging his suitcase after him, stepped lightly but briskly into the Lone Pine lumber yard. Since the portorial whisk-brooming service available on Way Freight Number Nine is almost negligible, Spiegel began immediately to supply it himself. The overalls, which constituted his going-away costume, disappeared into the suitcase. He brushed his suit, washed his face and hands at a pump, submitted to the tortures of a cold water shave, polished his shoes, combed his hair and "polished" his fingernails. Then, swinging his luggage, he strode into the highway and headed for the business section of the village.

From the T-Bone restaurant floated the tantalizing odor of coffee. The sight of the tobacco shelf through the soiled window, however, overwhelmed the coaxing in his nostrils and Spiegel went in. Quickly supplied with the ingredients, he twisted a cigarette, lit it, inhaled deeply, helped himself to a handful of matches from the box on the showcase, and strolled on.

Farther down he encountered the sign of the Ranchers' Home. Doctor Wilmington DeVito, founder, owner, manager and mainspring of the DeVito Remedy Company, who was still unaware that he was soon to be Spiegel's employer, probably was stopping there, the seer surmised. He decided to inquire.

"Yep, he's putting up with us," the girl at the desk replied. "Came in last night on Hundred an' Two. He's got room twenty but I guess he must be over to the Opery House now. I reckon you want breakfast."

Spiegel signed the register and informed her that her reckoning was accurate. He suffered himself to be led into the dining-room and permitted a meal to be thrust upon him by the same attendant who supervised his registration.

"You're waitress too, are you?" asked Spiegel.

"Yea, also bell hop, porter and assistant chef," she replied. "It's a great life, this hotel business. I reckon you're one of the show troupe."

"I am the Great Spiegel, telepathist extraordinary," he admitted in his professional manner. "I am joining Doctor DeVito's company today."

"Oh," she hazarded. "You're something like—well, like a chiropractor?"

"Not at all, not a-tawll," he hastened to assure her. "Perhaps you'd know my line if I called it mind reading."

She was impressed. "You can tell what people are thinking about?"

"Their inner reflections," he chanted, "are to me a open book."

"Well, if you read my mind, don't

do it out loud," she admonished him. "Do you tell fortunes?"

"I also reveal the future," he said as he emptied most of the contents of a syrup jug on a stack of flapjacks. The girl went to the kitchen to refill his coffee cup. When she returned Spiegel had completed the annihilation of the cakes.

"Could you tell me—if I was trying to work out in my mind the best thing to do—would you know whether I was figuring on the right thing?" she asked hesitantly.

"As a rule, I work only on the public stage," he said. "I use a crystal sphere—a glass ball you know—excavated from the tomb of a seer of ancient Egypt. But maybe I'll give you a private reading while I'm here, Miss—"

"Missus," she corrected. "Missus Rominy."

"Oh," he said as he drained the coffee cup. "You're married?"

"Yea, in a way. Does that make any difference in your work?"

"Not a bit," he assured her. "Some of my most pleased clients are always married people."

He arose from the table. "Which way's the theatre," he asked.

"The Opery House is a block that way," she directed with a finger. "And dinner's prompt at noon."

"Thanks, glad you mentioned it," he responded. "I'll be here."

The master of the minds of men found the eminent Doctor DeVito back-stage in the little second floor hall. The man of medicine was painting a sign in red letters on white muslin, announcing that on Saturday night a silver chocolate set would be awarded absolutely free to the most popular young lady of Cactus Junction, voting blanks to be given with every bottle of DeVito Herbs sold during the week.

"I am the Great Spiegel," announced that luminary.

There was no answer.

"Telepathy and crystal gazing."

Still the doctor did not respond. He

was retouching the "silver" and underlining the "free."

"I just got in," Spiegel went on.

The doctor turned and looked him over coldly. "Well, what of it?" he demanded.

"I saw your ad in Billboard for a novelty act," explained Spiegel, "so I came on."

"Why didn't you telegraph?"

"Broke," replied the prophet, completing the winding of a cigarette and striking a match on a "No Smoking" sign. "Outfit I was with blew up."

"What outfit?" asked DeVito.

"Shaker Liniment and Comedy Company."

"I know Doc Shaker," said DeVito. "He is a bum."

"An' he made a bum out of me," replied Spiegel. "After my act keepin' him and his show above water for a month."

"What made you think I could use a mental act?"

"You've got to want to use mine. I got the best line of its kind in the business, barring none. Big time stuff."

"Oh, yes, I suppose you're pretty good," observed the doctor, dryly. "Only reason you aren't playing the Orpheum is because Mr. Orpheum's wife didn't like the color of your eyes."

"We can't all play the big circuits," said Spiegel.

"So some of you big stars decided to lay off and give the hams a chance. Magnanimous of you."

"Yea, but listen—"

"And now you're riding around the country on freight trains just for the experience of roughing it."

"No use rubbing it in."

"I'm not. I'm trying to rub it out. I'm not running a big time show. I'm in the medicine game. If you've got a big time act, the same train you came in on is still switching cars in the yards. If you've got something that will fit in with a herb show, I may be able to use you. Come down to my level and let's talk business."

"Herb shows," said Spiegel, "are my long suit. The salary will be your limit. I do crystal gazin' and they ask me questions about their health. I advise 'em to take your physic. Together we knock 'em dead. I need a couple of dollars in advance."

DeVito surveyed the seer with admiration. He wiped his paint stained hands and reached for his pocket. "I hope," he said, "you live up to ten per cent of your own estimate. Here's two cartwheels. We'll set the salary when I see you work. It's up to you to show me whether that's a threat or a promise."

"Much obliged," said Spiegel, accepting the money. "I'll have 'em fighting to get into this place before the week's over."

"I suppose that's why the Shaker people went hay-wire," observed DeVito. "Everybody got mad because there wasn't room for them in the shop. The public's funny." He lifted his freshly lettered sign to a place of safety and continued: "I hear a lot about these turn-away acts but it's always before they open. After that they drive patrons away. But, anyhow, you might as well come on back and get acquainted with the rest of the boys."

Spiegel soon found himself established in the one dressing-room the theatre provided for its male occupants. There was a song and dance, an acrobat and a pair of novelty musicians. It was not long, however, before the "telepathist extraordinary" returned to the hotel, for in the person of the waitress-clerk, whose mind was burdened with a problem, he saw the nucleus of immediate popularity for his professional activities. He knew the value of a talkative woman as a small-town advertising medium.

"When you answer questions do you tell names?" she wanted to know as he approached the desk.

"Not if the party don't sign it," he replied. "I pass out cards and envelopes. They write the questions on the cards and seal them up. I collect the ques-

tions and put them in a bowl in plain sight of the audience all the time without opening them. Later on I put myself in a mystic trance and reveal them, with the help of the glass ball."

"Oh, you've got to have the ball," she said.

"Generally I have to consult it."

"Well," she confessed, "I got a question I want to ask. I'll be at the show tonight."

"Do that," he urged her. "Ladies are free Monday night, accompanied by one adult ticket. Bring your husband."

She shook her head. "We ain't good friends," she declared.

The girl's earnestness was still in Spiegel's memory when he donned his turban and robe for his Cactus Junction debut that night. Mrs. Rominy sat, alone, in the third row and he flashed a smile of greeting in her direction as he handed her the first card, envelope and pencil. She did not know, however, that he had marked the card with his thumbnail in order that he might be certain of recognizing it later. When all the questions had been written, sealed and collected, and he had secretly exchanged them for the bundle of "dummy" envelopes in the glass jar, he retired to the dressing-room to look over the assortment.

As he had expected, the woman wanted advice along marital lines. During Doctor DeVito's harangue on the potency of his "extract of roots, barks, herbs, berries, shrubs, leaves, seeds and blossoms, guaranteed under the pure food and drug act to cure anything from yellow fever to housemaid's knee," Spiegel selected a half-dozen of the written queries, arranged them, by his secret system, so he could read them readily, and decided upon the answers.

When his turn came, he proceeded to advise the lady who lost the ring that she'd find it under a big tree with running water near by; warn the gentleman that the ball indicated it would not be advisable for him to undertake a long journey at this time; caution the girl

with the blue eyes that men with dark hair were more consistent, and to chatter other generalities in response to the contents of the envelopes. He purposely left Mrs. Rominy's answer for the close of the turn.

"We are masters of our own destinies," he told her. "This question is of such an intimate nature that I hesitate to reveal it in full. I can only say to the questioner that in the depths of the mystic sphere I see happiness for her if she lets love—true love—be her guide. She can find contentment if she has the courage to look for it. I'm sorry," he hesitated, "but the light grows dim. It's fading—fading," and he sat erect with a start. "The time allotted to me has been used up. If I failed to reach any of your questions, perhaps I may be able to do so tomorrow night."

Among the young girls with half-broken hearts, older ones who believed their husbands did not understand them, and elderly men whose livers and joints were not functioning, Spiegel's nightly appearance was highly popular. For the heart affairs he gave a variety of suggestions. For the other ailments he urged the use of DeVito herbs. The doctor found his assistance valuable and votes for the chocolate set rolled into the ballot box.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get in trouble," asked DeVito, a day or two later, "by telling these women their husbands are unfaithful and advising the men to buy oil stock? What if they believe you?"

"Oh, they believe me all right," grinned Spiegel. "But we'll be out of town before anything happens."

"I don't mind you boosting the herbs, you understand. Most of your stuff is all right. But you told a woman tonight her husband was running around with other dames. That might prove to be dangerous in this sort of the country unless you can prove it.

"Safe enough in this case," answered Spiegel confidently. "I know her story and I'm telling her what she wants to

hear. Besides it may be the truth. The crystal ball says so."

"Yea, and maybe Pike's Peak is stuffed with goose livers," responded DeVito quickly. "Don't say I didn't warn you if that husband shows up."

"He won't," said the seer, confidently.

The trend of his "readings" did not change. His popularity increased for telepathists were a new species in Cactus Junction. And the show prospered.

"Who was that big, hard lookin' bird that came in just as you started to work?" the acrobat inquired while they were removing their grease paint following the Friday night performance. "He didn't have any questions but he didn't take his eye off of you all the time you were on. He didn't act, either, like he was any too well pleased."

"I saw him," replied Spiegel indifferently. "I probably got him going."

"I don't like his looks," the acrobat insisted. "He's sore about something and he's a big brute."

"Just his disposition and a few drinks," answered the prophet. "He'll have to step lively if he wants to find out anything from me. We close here tomorrow night. You run into some funny nuts in this business."

"You sure do," replied the other with a shade of insinuation in his voice which was entirely lost upon Spiegel.

Came Saturday night's closing performance. Spiegel noticed, with surprise, that for the first time during the engagement, Mrs. Rominy was not in the audience. Her absence irritated him. He had planned to give her an especially frank reading.

But the big, bronzed man was there and again his piercing eyes remained fixed, steadily on the seer's turban. There was something so ominous and determined in the spectator's manner that Spiegel hurried through, unable to shake off the increasing haze of misgivings. He recalled Doctor DeVito's warning and wondered what the source of the disgruntled patron's ire might be.

An hour later when trunks had been locked and other paraphernalia made ready for hauling to the railway station and an early morning get away, Spiegel, having crammed his limited personal belongings into his suitcase, started for the Ranchers' Home to snatch a few hours' sleep. He had gone but a few steps when he realized he was being followed; and his heart quivered when he saw it was the bulky, sullen spectator. Spiegel quickened his step. So did his shadower. Spiegel slowed his gait hoping the man would pass him. But his trailer's speed also was reduced.

The telepathist entered the hotel, procured his room key at the desk and as he turned towards the stairs he got a glimpse of the big man eyeing him from the doorway. Spiegel climbed the steps and hastened down the hall. As he turned the key the other man appeared at the top of the stairs, and when Spiegel attempted to close the door he found the giant's foot against it, and the sharp, cold eyes staring at him.

"Was there something you wanted?" asked the seer, nervously. The man pushed aside and entered the room, closed the door and stood with his back against it. Spiegel detected the odor of raw liquor. From under the intruder's arm came a pistol, which, to the terrified crystal-gazer seemed of enormous size.

"I want to talk to you," the man said thickly. "I'm Bart Rominy and the handle of my gun's all notched up."

Spiegel was speechless.

"You been tellin' my wife all this week I ain't been true to her, an' I been runnin' with other wimmin."

Spiegel's knees gave way. He sat on the bed, too weak to attempt a defense.

"An' you been tellin' her she ought to follow her own conscience and throw me down, ain't you?" The muzzle of the gun described a persuasive circle.

"I told her only what I saw in the ball."

"Well, you and the ball is both liars," snorted Rominy. "I ain't been runnin' with other wimmin. I'm all through with 'em—all of 'em. See? I'm the best husband Ann Rominy ever had and she didn't appreciate me. You understand that?"

"But, I didn't—didn't mean—"

"Don't care what you meant," stormed Rominy. "You defamed my character. Advised her to leave me. Look out for her own happiness."

"I—I—I didn't know she was married," lied Spiegel feebly.

"The hell you didn't. Glass marble didn't say anything about that, huh? Anyway she's gone. Left town tonight with a nasty little book agent. Never even wrote me a note. Do you know where she went to?"

"I'll try to find out," Spiegel volunteered eagerly. "I'll go get the ball."

"Set down," roared Rominy. The gun was leveled unsteadily at the sooth-sayer's breast. "She left me a year ago. Sued me for divorce. Case ain't been settled yet but I've been havin' to pay her alimony. See? Court order. Now she's gone. Won't have to pay her any more. I'm leavin' too. If you an' your damn ball ever tell her where I'm at, I'll fill you so full of lead they'll have to lift your coffin with a derrick. You get me, don't you?"

Spiegel nodded.

The man moved awkwardly toward the door. "So long," he flung back as he passed into the hall. "I'm much obliged."

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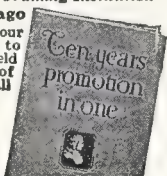
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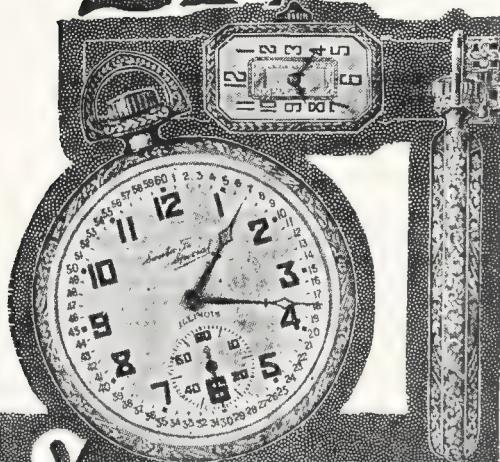
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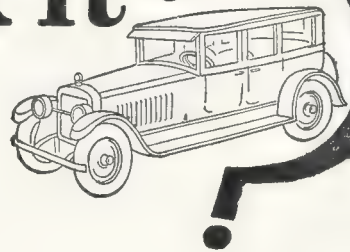
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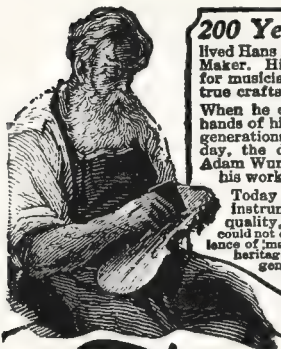
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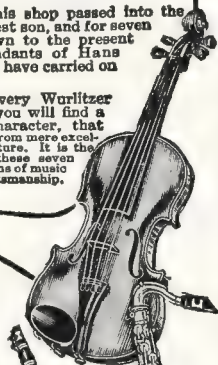
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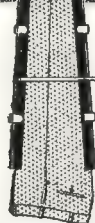
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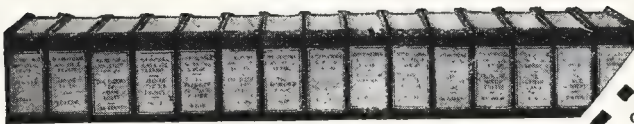
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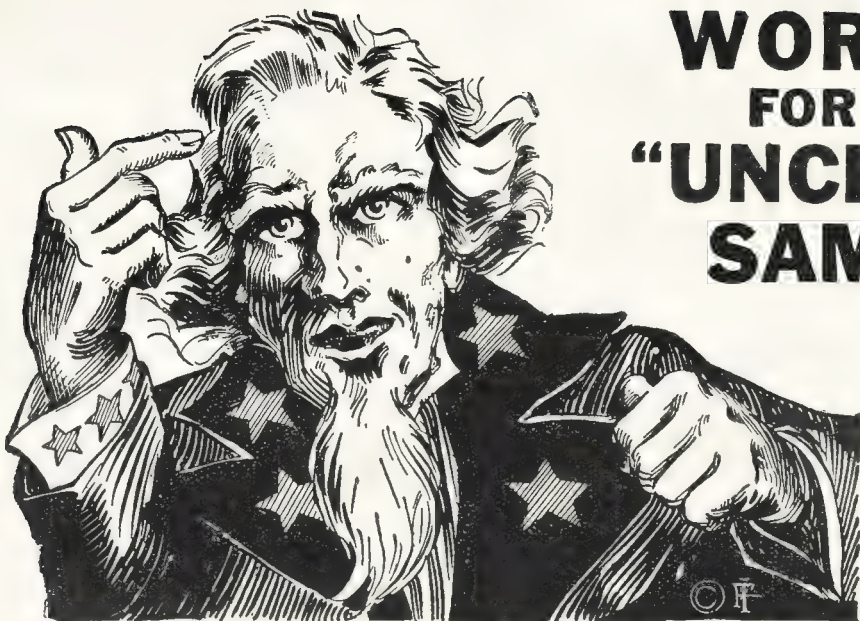
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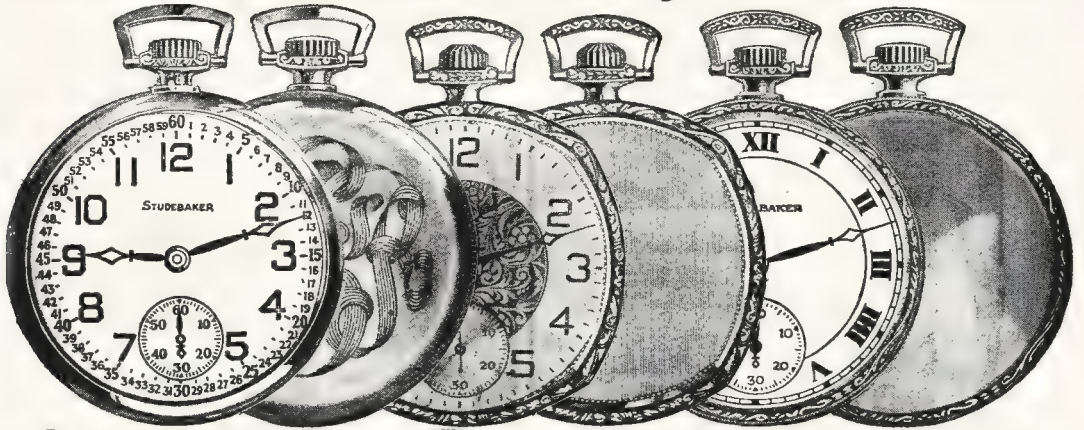
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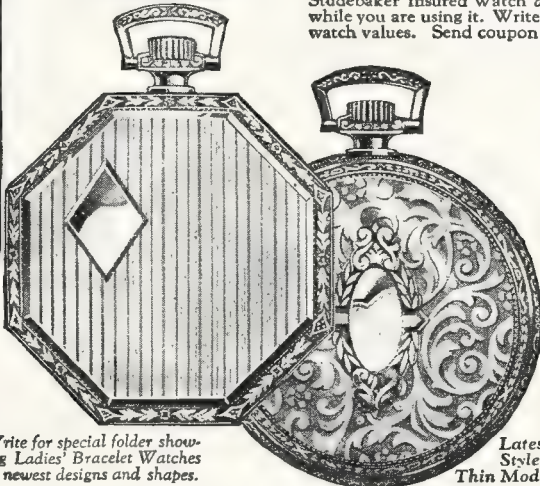
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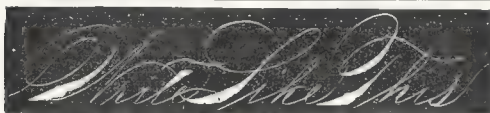
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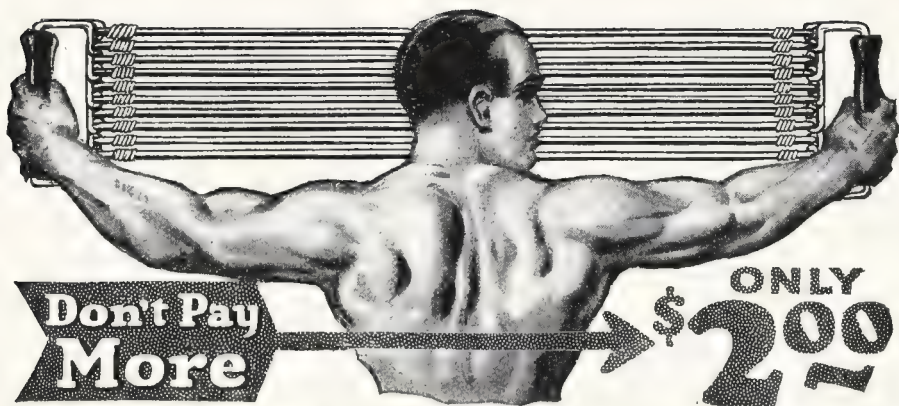
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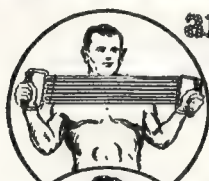
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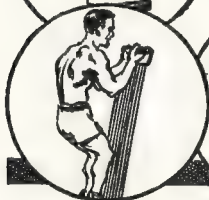
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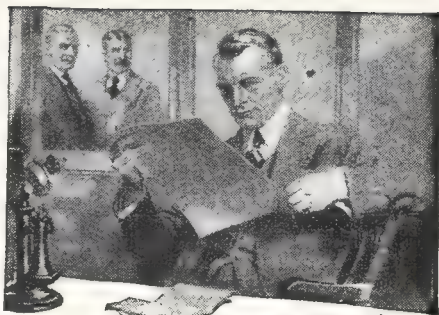
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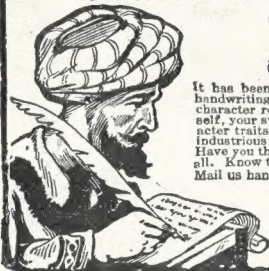
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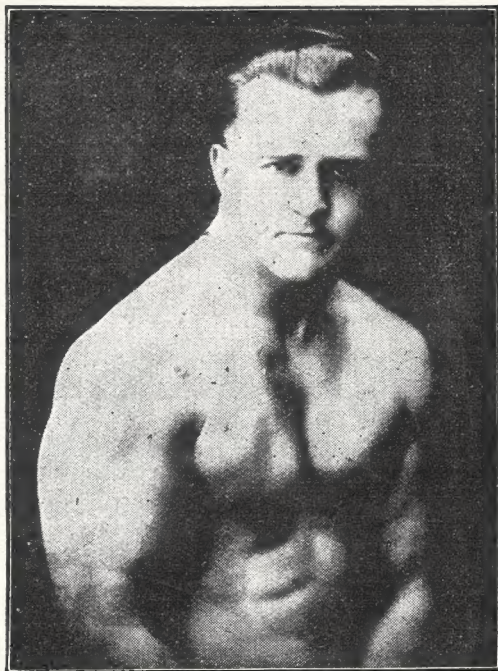
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and I offered something that would give you ten years more to live, would you take it? You'd grab it. Well, fellows, I've got it, but don't wait till you're dying or it won't do you a bit of good. It will then be too late. Right now is the time. Tomorrow, or any day, some disease will get you and if you have not equipped yourself to fight it off, you're gone. I don't claim to cure disease. I am not a medical doctor, but I'll put you in such condition that the doctor will starve to death waiting for you to take sick. Can you imagine a mosquito trying to bite a brick wall? A fine chance.

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I like to get the weak ones. I delight in getting hold of a man who has been turned down as hopeless by others. It's easy enough to finish a task that's more than half done. But give me the weak, sickly chap and watch him grow stronger. That's what I like. It's fun to me because I know I can do it and I like to give the other fellow the laugh. I don't simply give you a veneer of muscle that looks good to others. I work on you both inside and out. I not only put big, massive arms and legs on you, but I build up those inner muscles that surround your vital organs. The kind that give you real pep and energy, the kind that fire you with ambition and the courage to tackle anything set before you.

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Who says it takes years to get in shape? Show me the man who makes any such claims and I'll make him eat his words. I'll put one full inch on your arm in just 30 days. Yes, and two full inches on your chest in the same length of time. Meanwhile, I'm putting life and pep into your old back-bone. And from then on, just watch 'em grow. At the end of thirty days you won't know yourself. Your whole body will take on an entirely different appearance. But you're only started. Now come the real works. I've only built my foundation. I want just 60 days more (90 in all) and you'll make those friends of yours, who think they're strong, look like something the cat dragged in.

A Real Man

When I'm through with you, you're a real man. The kind that can prove it. You will be able to do things you had thought impossible. And the beauty of it is you keep on going. Your deep, full chest breathes in rich, pure air, stimulating your blood and making you just bubble over with vim and vitality. Your huge square shoulders and your massive muscular arms have that craving for exercise of a regular he-man. You have the flash to your eye and the pep to your step that will make you admired and sought after, both in business and social world.

This is no idle prattle, fellows. If you doubt me, make me prove it. Go ahead, I like it. I have already done this for thousands of others and my records are unchallenged. What I have done for them, I will do for you. Come, then, for time flies and every day counts. Let this very day be the beginning of new life to you.

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